No Good End in View

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No Good End in View

by not_whelmed_yet

Summary

A first meeting gone wrong: Astarion tries to slake his thirst on one of the crash victims, Wyll tries to kill a monster.

The team finds themselves with a captive, seemingly immortal, vampire and no good options. Can Astarion find a way to escape the role the author has chosen for him? Can forgiveness and friendship be forged between these walking wounded, who all have reasons to trust no-one?

Notes

A fill for a kinkmeme prompt that I posted and then got so desperate for someone to fill that I wrote it myself https://baldurskink.dreamwidth.org/695.html?thread=393655

I'm a few chapters ahead in writing and Karlach has popped up and insisted this will be a wyll/astarion/karlach fic and not just wyllstarion, because she does that. Given that I was the one who prompted it in the first place, I'm letting the spirit move me even if it gets a bit away from the original prompt :p it has also materialized as a whole tadpole party alternating POV fic, to my surprise

I plan for this to be an Act 1 fic, but outlining is not a personal strength so we shall see

Title from the mountain goats song January 31, 438, which to me is a huge Wyll & Astarion song

Chapter 1: Wyll

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

His father had always told him that society would fall to base impulses without a strong hand to keep it in check. That in times of tragedy and upheaval, it would be each for themselves and the monsters who disguised themselves as men would run rampant. That the only way to stop people from succumbing was to make them fear for the consequences.

And maybe that was true. But people seemed plenty scared already. And for all the monsters he had seen, he'd also seen tragedy bring out the best in people. Men who ran into burning buildings to rescue neighbors they cared little for. Orphans sheltered and loved by strangers in the wake of monster attacks. He'd seen communities band together after flood and sickness and poor harvest.

The world was a cruel place and the gods intervened rarely, only to their own ends. But people could choose to do better. And they did, time and again.

Surrounded by the wreckage of the mindflayer ship, smoke and foul decay thick in the air, Wyll promised the first survivor he met that *they* would do better. That he would not abandon her or any other survivors. That they would find help.

The second survivor they found was murdered by a monster.

Wyll spotted them first. Further down the bank, half in the water. The light-skinned elf was crouching over the other, and for a moment he thought they might be listening for a pulse, attempting to render aid. Then the elf showed his fangs and the vampire tore into the man's throat.

Wyll didn't call a warning. He had little experience with vampires, but he knew how difficult a fight with one could be, even with the benefit of preparation and surprise. He raised his left hand and threw the power of the Hells at the vampire with an eldritch blast, even as he began to run. He drew his sword.

Blood swirled red in the water around the man's torn throat. Wyll hit the vampire with a knee to the face, then threw it to the ground. One arm drove the sword into the vampire's back, blade scraping on bone and then sliding true. The other hand grabbed for the vampire's hair, shoved its face down under the water.

It thrashed, but didn't break his hold. Wyll didn't stop to wonder his good fortune. A vampire could only be killed in a handful of ways and a sword to the chest wouldn't suffice. By rights it should be dead already, out in the full of the sun and held down in running water, but they'd have time for questions later. Wyll positioned his knee firmly on the creature's back, mentally apologized to the blacksmith who had forged him this rapier, and struck down with his full strength to sever its head from its neck.

The blade caught on bone again and the vampire howled. It threw him off, stolen blood in the water and coursing down its neck as it tried to scrabble to its feet. Wyll let his heart harden to the agony on that beautiful face—once stolen from some mortal elf, now long dead. The second blow took its head off cleanly.

The adrenaline of the fight left him all at once and he sank back down onto one knee, rapier held against his leg with shaking arms. A vampire. Clearly spawn, or it would have slipped into mist or summoned a wolf to take Wyll down before feasting on him in turn. Even against a spawn, which he had faced before, he hadn't expected it to go down to a amateur's rush like that. A spawn was stronger than a human and certainly faster. Wyll gasped for air as the immediacy of the death he'd just evaded screamed in his head.

Behind him, Shadowheart snarled an invocation he recognized as a major healing spell. He found her on her knees, hands laced over the man's throat, blood spiderwebbed over her fingers. No magic followed her words, only the wrenching tremor of too-strong magic shaking its way through an amateur's body. She made a wordless noise in her throat, agonized, then spoke the incantation of a minor healing word. This time, the magic lit beneath her hands, flared for a moment.

Even Wyll could see it wasn't enough. The man's face had gone slack, his eyes glassy. No minor magic could save him now.

Shadowheart lifted her hands from the man's throat, still torn open. The blood flowed sluggishly now, no heart to pump it. "I could not revive him," she said, voice hollow. "My connection to the deeper weave is interrupted."

"The worms," Wyll suggested. He wondered what would happen if he tried to use one of the stronger Pact spells. "I've been weaker, since the ship. Perhaps it is a side effect of the...implantation." He couldn't feel it now that it was deep into his head, but to make space for it, something in there must have been destroyed. The thought made him want to retch, but the Blade carried him through.

"When we're healed, our strength will return," Shadowheart said, with the conviction of someone who needed it to be true. Wyll agreed with her, no less desperate.

They carried the man up onto the beach. Wyll cleaned off his blade, then resheathed it. They were going to have to do something about all the bodies before they ventured inland, but first they needed to make sure there were no other survivors. And before that, he was going to need to empty the water out of his boots. Hiking through blisters and sodden foot wrapping never led anywhere heroic and was best—

The stench of sulfur hit him like a pulse beneath Mizora's sending stone, nauseatingly familiar. There was a crack of magic, ozone and hellfire and the chest-constricting feeling of the Planes below looming up to meet them. It came from the water and was followed by a scream.

He whirled around to see the vampire emerge from the steaming water, still burning with hellfire. It was screaming, one long continuous noise of pain, hands slapping at its throat where Wyll's sword had severed it.

“Incende!” Shadowheart called, and cold fire lit the vampire from within. Its skin bubbled and blackened and Wyll took the opportunity for what it was. He stomped on one of the broken barrels near the shoreline, wrenched one of the wooden staves free. Wading back out into the water, he beat back the thing’s flailing arms to drive it into the water again and the improvised stake into its heart. It fought back less this time; the infernal magic that resurrected it did not give it back its strength. When the stake finally drove home it shuddered and stilled, fingers digging into Wyll’s bare hands, blunted nails unable to draw blood.

This time they took no chances. Wyll dragged the second corpse up out of the water and they stood on either side of it, waiting.

Hellfire roared and resurrection magic wrenched the thing back to—well, not life, but its facsimile. This time they were quicker: Shadowheart casting sacred flame and Wyll driving another stave into its chest. The ornate embroidery of its tunic was ruined, torn through on either side. It died again and this time Wyll let the stake in place. “Perhaps this will stop it from regenerating,” he suggested.

It didn’t. The vampire resurrected, then died again without Wyll needing to do a thing, hands limply grasping for the stave, trying to pull it out. It was quieter this time: the screaming gone hoarse.

On the next resurrection it didn’t scream at all, just breathed in great gasping sobs. It didn’t bother to reach for the stake, just stared at Wyll with its red eyes blown wide. It didn’t need to breathe at all, it was a damned vampire.

It was in horrible pain because they were torturing it.

Even if it was a monster, even if it had killed that man, some things were wrong. There were lines you didn’t cross. Its breathing stilled again, eyes gone dim, and Wyll pulled the stake out.

“We need a new plan,” he said to Shadowheart. “We can’t keep doing this forever. And I don’t want to call down whatever patron has gifted it immortality. Who knows what other bargains it may have made?” Though it would be just like a devil to promise resurrection with no plan for rescue if that resurrection trapped you in an infinite cycle of torture and death. But the cost of fulfilling such a bargain—it didn’t make sense to waste so much magic on a contract with no soul to feast on at the end. The whole thing made no sense.

“We can’t let it go. It’ll gorge itself on corpses and then come kill us,” Shadowheart said.

“Even if it fled, I couldn’t let it run off into the wilderness and eat more people,” Wyll agreed. “I’ve seen towns preyed on by vampire spawn. There’s little any civilian can do to save themselves except hide in their houses till they die for lack of water. Sometimes they do, rather than step outside and be eaten. A feral spawn thinks of nothing but blood, and its hunger is unending. We couldn’t let it free.”

The hellfire lit again, and there was no more time to debate. Wyll unbuckled his belt and looped it around the vampire’s wrists, binding them tightly. “I’m going to need some rope,”

he said, and Shadowheart kicked up sand as she ran to up the bank to hunt for it. Mourning the loss of a good bracer, he unbuckled the leather buckles holding it onto his left wrist and folded it in two. The vampire hissed at him, fangs fully extended, and Wyll spat out the incantation to command it to freeze in place. It only held for a moment, but that was long enough for him to stuff the folded leather bracer into its mouth and clamp its jaw shut with his joined hands, its head wedged against his hipbone for leverage.

The successive resurrections had weakened it enough that it barely tried to fight him off, instead making muffled noises like a person trying to speak. A vampire spawn could charm a person out of the safety of their house and into its fangs if given the chance; Wyll didn't intend to. Shadowheart came back with a rope from a half-charred bedroll. They threaded the rope through the buckles on either side of his bracer, forcing the bracer deep into its mouth and tying it behind its head where it couldn't be dislodged.

The vampire lay on the blood-soaked sand, wheezing through its nose, and gave up. It looked at Wyll and Shadowheart, then let its eyes close and laid there, boneless.

"My name is Wyll. The Blade of Frontiers. This is Shadowheart, a powerful cleric. I will not let you hurt anyone else, spawn. But if you comply, we will not hurt you either."

"Are you suggesting we keep it as a pet?" Shadowheart stared at him, aghast.

What better option did they have? "Only until we are healed and regain our abilities. Then we'll figure out a more permanent solution."

The vampire kept its eyes closed, but it made a disapproving noise in its throat.

"I don't see any option besides keeping it close or letting it go," Wyll said. "And leaving it to be found by other potential victims or wriggle free is little different from letting it go."

"You said it was a spawn—doesn't that mean there's a true vampire somewhere, other spawn? We don't need a vampire nest raining down on our heads. We have more than enough problems already."

"It was likely dropped here in the crash, same as us. Its resistance to the sun may come from the tadpole—or, more likely, its infernal bargain. If its sire was alive, it wouldn't be letting it make deals for immortality. This one's likely a feral—a spawn with a dead sire. But either way, it's been dropped hundreds of miles from home."

Shadowheart shook her head. "Honestly, I remember little of vampires, besides what everyone knows. What you say makes sense. But it will slow us down, and we can ill afford it. We've both wasted magic already that we may need in the hours to come. But there's nothing to be done for it now." She crouched down and snapped her fingers in the vampire's face until those red eyes opened again, squinting at her in hatred. "Bloodsucker: heed me. On the mindflayer ship—did they infect you with one of their little monsters? Like a leech that wriggles in through the eye?"

The ship. The pod. The tadpole, forcing itself in like a wire through his eye socket, panic, pain, again—but impossible to focus on any of that over the endless all-consuming drone of

hunger. Like he's a temple collapsing into the Underdark, the ground swallowed into caverns below, falling without end, drowning without water, the drone burns out everything but—

The connection drops. Wyll breathes slowly, forcing the shakiness of borrowed pain out of his body, forcing the weakness off of his face. No wonder vampires go mad. It would be a mercy if they could kill this one, release it from its suffering.

"So that's a yes," Shadowheart said, seemingly unaffected. "Then you're also infected. That thing in your head? It will turn you, and all of us, into mindflayers."

The vampire stared at her, then breathed out in undignified snort. It began to make a high pitched gasping noise, and it took Wyll a moment to realize it was *laughing*. Wyll understood the temptation. He wished he could succumb to hysterics as well.

"Becoming a monster may not matter to you, being as you already are one," Shadowheart said. "But I do not intend to give up. I am going to find a cure. If you slow down that mission, you will regret it."

Chapter End Notes

sorry astarion!! got lots of thoughts about how if anyone in this party stepped a bit to the left before they met first as allies they could instead be collateral damage and I've decided to explore this through Jack Harkness style insta-resurrections. also: did you see how many dead bodies there were lying around on that beach? it's like someone laid out an astarion buffet

Chapter 2: Lae'zel

Chapter Notes

> welcome to the Lae'zel chapter! This was my first time writing from her perspective and I wanted to thank bluebeholder for their incredibly useful glossary. You should also definitely check out Ushauz's Heart of Stone, a Lae'zel character study that I enjoyed very much and informed how I write her voice.
>
> this is the chapter wherein Astarion manages to (somehow) dig himself deeper...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She has failed, and there is no sa‘varsh to cull her for the failing.

She was not prepared for the challenges of the mission she set herself to. She had committed the sin of pride that blinds the fighter to their own limits. She could have stood to side in a battle-formation and followed the orders and missions of her elders, an honorable tool for Vlaakith. She had wanted more. She had wanted to be recognized, be lifted up into the Astral Sea as a red rider. She had let wanting lead her to disaster, pride lead her to destruction.

And now she was alone, disarmed and captive, infected with a ghaik abomination.

The red-horned natives taunt her, gloating over their victory. It would not be so humiliating if these fools, these *k’chakhi*, knew how to handle a captive, or even a weapon. A Githyanki with a captive would have by now extracted the necessary information and been done with it. She had been captured by trap-making cowards who didn’t even *want* anything from her. Years of training to resist torture, wasted on fools.

Soon they would make a mistake, venture close enough to the cage for Lae’zel to snag one. Once one was at her mercy, the other—weak-hearted—would be easy to force into releasing her. Once she was free, she would kill them. No one would know of this indignity. But she had been waiting, ready, long enough the that muscles in her arms and legs were burning from the tension, her nerves stretched tight in readiness.

Her plans were interrupted by the arrival of another istik. This one bore the signs of past battles—the skin of his face marked by claws and one eye replaced by grey stone. His body spoke of power, of ease with the narrow sword sheathed at his belt.

He came alone to parley with the red creatures and, with a bared-teeth grimace they did not seem to read as aggression, extracted from them the location of their den and sent them scurrying back to it with promises that he would deal with Lae’zel on their behalf. When they were gone, he used a bolt of force magic to knock down Lae’zel’s prison and freed her without even demanding assurances.

He gathered her debts easily, even before their ghaik-invaders revealed their shared doom. The worm forced visions on her—lands of fire, a hunt for a one-horned devil, capture, the long-eared woman who unwillingly allied with Lae'zel in the fight on the ghaik ship. She pushed those visions away, snarling. Her mind was *hers* and she had fought to keep it that way through years of training.

But their shared condition gave her an easy opportunity to settle debts. She would travel to a crèche and have the infection purged—she offered to bring him as her revrykal and bestow him the same honor. He accepted easily, though duty required he also find and kill the devil he was hunting. That could wait until after the crèche.

More troubling, he revealed that he had allied with the lying woman, Shadowheart.

Lae'zel didn't know what secrets the woman was hiding, but they danced across her face like lighting across a storming sky, blatant as blood. She tried to conceal them with hostility and lies against the Gith people. The swordsman, Wyll, would not go without both of them. She owed the istik a debt and would not renege, no matter his poor taste in company. She vowed to ignore Shadowheart until whatever wretched secrets she was keeping tumbled out and lost her Wyll's loyalties. Then they could cull her and continue on.

They had a captive of their own. An undead leech, of a type Lae'zel had never encountered before. A "vampire"—a creature that fed on living blood, used it to mimic the appearance of the living in order to disguise itself among them. The vampire had killed a mortal under Wyll's protection. They had retaliated with swift death, but some powerful magic prevented them from killing it permanently.

It seemed a pathetic thing, hardly worth being frightened of. Its skin had the pallor of bleached bones and the wounds on its chest seeped no blood, for all the stains on the ornamented frippery of its clothing. It swayed on its feet, eyes dull, like a student who had failed in defending against psionic training. She did not like it.

"We do not need further burdens slowing us in reaching the creche," she argued. "If it resurrects, place it somewhere that will not lead it to freedom. The river is deep away from shore. It could be weighed down to keep it below the water, where it cannot be easily found."

The vampire made a whining noise, like a sword had been pulled from its chest.

Wyll's face darkened. She had spoken wrong, though she did not see how. "We will not reduce ourselves to torture, Lae'zel."

"It is practical."

"Many wretched things are practical," he said. "Nonetheless. No. We will keep the vampire from attacking others until we can find a way of severing its infernal contract. We will not hurt it, unless needful to complete that mission." He tilted his head, clearly recognizing her confusion. "The vampire is my responsibility, Lae'zel."

"I do not understand how so many charges can fall under your responsibility," she confessed. "Are you a warrior of great status?"

He bared his teeth at her, then bowed to her in submission, showing the back of his neck. A whirlwind of mixed signals, this istik was. “The Blade of Frontiers at your service. I protect the Sword Coast.”

He could not be argued out of keeping the leech close at hand, and she did not understand the ways of Fayrun enough to debate the istik to the correct conclusions. They returned to the beach to salvage supplies for the journey ahead. In a wall of rock they found another human man, a magic-user and apparently a fool. Another infected. The ghaik had been busy. He spoke a great deal and would be a valuable source in teaching her the ways of this realm as they traveled. His magic would also be an aid, for all that he complained of powers he had once possessed and then lost. He was able to mend and clean the things they found on the beach as they assembled the basics of a campsite.

They took watching the vampire in shifts, while the others scoured the shoreline and completed funeral duties for the dead. The dead were not fighters, no weapons to be found amongst them. Still, Wyll insisted they be laid out and rites said and the bodies burned. A waste of time, but none argued with him except Lae’zel. There was a challenge that needed her skills at last when they ventured into the remains of the ship and found more ghaik servitors and one surviving ghaik that needed killing. This, she could do.

The camp they assembled was sparse, but contained more luxuries than a creche dormitory. Padded cloths to lay on the ground, a meal cooked over the fire and served hot. The substance of the food was unfamiliar, strangely textured and flavored, but Gith were resistant to most poisons and she did not protest. “We’ll go hunting tomorrow if we cannot find the druid encampment to trade,” Wyll promised her, thinking her hesitance a sign of snobbery.

After some debate, they settled the vampire at a spot near the fire. The ropes around its hands were further fastened to its chest, and a piece of metal was bent around the bindings on its ankles and pounded into the earth to keep it from moving. Wyll suggested that Shadowheart might waste one of her spells to heal the open wounds on its chest, but his silver tongue couldn’t lead her that far into she’lak foolishness.

They settled on a watch order for the night. It was only through long training to take rest wherever it was offered, no matter how uncomfortable the circumstances, that Lae’zel managed to sleep.

Her mind screeched in wounded terror at the thing in her head, at the fate that awaited them. Even in the tales told by older trainees, there had been no endings where a lone githyanki found themselves turned. There were always others in those tales. Stronger, wiser, gith who evaded capture and did what was necessary to prevent any from turning. There was a protocol. She should…she wouldn’t give up yet. Salvation was still possible if they could find a crèche.

She was awoken by screaming. This was not an unfamiliar experience, and her body reacted before her mind was fully aware. Her sword to hand, her feet under her. To awaken to battle was a necessary skill.

Against the dull red of the coals, she found Shadowheart on top of the vampire, a knife in its chest and its flesh smoking from a blast of radiant fire. There was blood on Shadowheart’s

neck, oozing black in the low light. She scrabbled for the mace in the dirt beside her bedroll and swung it up above her head.

The vampire threw up its arms and spat out an incantation. Fire leapt from its hands and Shadowheart flinched back.

Lae'zel swung her sword down and severed its head. Blood rushed from the severed neck, stained the creature's mouth and chin. Clearly Shadowheart lacked the reflexes of a Githyanki and had let the creature drain her of precious resources before finally awakening to defend herself.

"Not the most enjoyable wakeup call I've had," Gale said, untangling himself from his bedroll. "How did it wriggle free of our ropework? I thought we'd done an admirable job on the whole thing."

"It bit me!" Shadowheart said. As if none of them could see the obvious. "Your pet monster tried to *kill me*, Wyll."

"Which of us was supposed to be awake?" Wyll asked. "I was supposed to be after Gale." He knelt down by the spot where the vampire had been tied, looking over the tangled rope that had been left there.

"Ah, well, that may be my fault," Gale admitted. "This has been a very exhausting day, in my defense, and staring at a fire is apparently a right soporific. Won't happen again."

Shadow hissed: "It better not. Not when our necks are on the line."

There was a roar of fire and a foul stench as the head and body of the vampire were both consumed in flames. Gale, who had leaned over to peer down at the vampire, jumped back with a startled noise. When the fire died down, the head was missing from where it had been beside Lae'zel's boot and was attached to the vampire's neck again. The thing screeched wetly, blood coming out of its mouth in froth. The knife Shadowheart had buried in its chest must have hit its lungs. How inefficient for the already dead to breathe.

The noise was irritating. Lae'zel cut its head off again.

"Thank you, Lae'zel," Gale said. "Perhaps we should secure the prisoner before continuing this conversation further? It appears to have access to firebolt as a elven cantrip—fascinating that it retains access to fey magics even after—"

"Perhaps magic would hold it more securely, Gale," Wyll interrupted. "Could you cast hold person?"

"Ah. Well. I *could* cast hold person, at one point. I just—channeling the weave is more challenging now than it used to be. I could cast snare, though! A child could cast snare. I did, repeatedly, as a child. My mother did not find it terribly amusing to be trussed up when traversing the length of the kitchen but I thought it was—"

"Magic now," Lae'zel said. "Prattle after."

“Someone find me some rope. I need about 30 feet of it,” Gale said. “This might take, er, a minute. The vampire might come back to life before I’m ready.”

“I’ll deal with it,” Shadowheart said, swinging the mace onto her shoulder. The spawn’s fire spell had burned her across one hand. She glared at Lae’zel, clearly feeling shamed by Lae’zel stepping in to handle her attacker. Lae’zel did not care about her wounded pride. But she had no interest in arguing when they could be sleeping, preparing for the journey and the days to come. She set her sword to her shoulder in a guard position and slid to stand between the vampire’s body and Gale, where she would be outside Shadowheart’s reach.

The resurrection magic was unnatural. She could smell its flesh burn beneath the sulfur. It set her teeth on edge. Shadowheart was swift this time, dropping the mace onto its neck and pressing down with one knee to compress its windpipe so it could speak no incantations. “You tried to kill me,” Shadowheart said, her voice dripping venom. “Remember that there is only one man here who has argued for mercy. I would happily bind you and toss you in the Chionthar, as the lizard suggested. Or keep you with us, on that knife’s edge before death. You may resurrect when your head is removed, but what about your ears? Your hands? Your feet? *Do not test me*.”

“Shadowheart!” Wyll protested.

The vampire gurgled around its compressed throat, eyes bulging.

“Cooperate and I will let Wyll handle you as sweetly as he pleases,” Shadowheart said, wrenching her dagger out of its chest with her free hand. “Attempt to touch me again and I will scatter pieces of you across the continent.”

Wyll knelt down beside the vampire’s head, the leather gag in his hand. “Shadowheart, that’s enough. I’m sure even a spawn could understand when it’s outnumbered.”

“It was outnumbered last night, and it still bit me.”

“There’s no need to be cruel.”

“If it behaves, I won’t need to be cruel.”

“I’ll talk to her,” Wyll said to the vampire, before offering up the gag. “Bite down, please? Not on my fingers, if you would.”

The vampire bared its teeth at him, but allowed Wyll to fit it with the gag again and fasten it in place. Wyll leaned over and picked up its left hand, and then the right, inspecting them in the dim light. The vampire held itself perfectly still, hands slick with blood and unnaturally shaped from however it had slipped the ropes. “What the hells did you do to yourself?” Wyll muttered. “We can’t tie it up again like this, Shadowheart. It’s inhumane.”

“It would learn a valuable lesson,” Shadowheart sniped. “About the dangers of biting me.”

“Yes, yes, your precious neck, we have heard your whining,” Lae’zel said. “You teach it nothing. A beast trapped in a trap will chew itself free or bleed to death in the attempt. Fear

can guide compliance, terror teaches nothing." She thought Wyll was quite canny, in this. A lashing broke spirits, but a lashing followed by gentle touches, a healer's attentions…that bought loyalty. She had seen it acted out on her fellows, even herself, but knowing did little to stop the effects. For the Githyanki, of course, loyalty to Vlaakith was natural. The methods they used simply helped the mind to accept what the heart already knew.

"We distributed our healing potions earlier, waste one on it if you want," Shadowheart said.

Wyll fetched his pack and brought forth a healing potion in its narrow square-sided flask. It would do little for the creature, Lae'zel thought, and Wyll clearly debated where to use it. The creature's skin was blistered and raw from Shadowheart's fire, its hands were mangled, and the open wounds across its chest were beginning to make the thing resemble a flesh-covered training dummy. Shadowheart's mace was still pressed into its throat; the crackle-snap of cartilage from her crushing its windpipe had been audible. Of course, the thing was dead, none of that had stopped it from slipping its bonds and attacking them in the night. But undeath did not seem to shield it from pain; a bargain only a fool would have taken.

Lae'zel watched in fascination as Wyll pulled a square rag and a waterskin from his pack, then washed the blood off the vampire's hands and wrists. He laid the rag beneath those cupped hands and poured the healing potion into them, letting the red liquid that slipped through its fingers soak into the cloth and press against the back of its hands. Setting the potion aside, he straightened each finger in turn, letting the bones align and set straight as the healing took. The remains of the healing potion he wrung out into the open wounds on it's chest, which did little to heal them.

"Vampires are supposed to regenerate on their own," Gale said as Wyll finally finished his task. "I admit I haven't concentrated my studies on the habits of monsters, but I'm sure that was a trait shared by both true vampires and their spawn."

"Infernal magic exacts a price, and not one you care to pay," Wyll said. "Magic presented as a gift may feed off the user's soul or lifeforce, with only a small portion actually supplied by the devil who made the bargain. This magic must be an expensive gift."

The vampire made a noise in protest, glaring at Wyll.

Gale completed the incantation for the snare spell with a flourish. and Shadowheart and Wyll slid rolled the vampire over the circle of rope. The trap snapped to, wrapping the vampire up like a beast on a spit before darting up into the air to dangle it upside down, suspended several feet from the ground. The vampire wiggled furiously, but the rope had his arms secured tightly to his sides. "That will hold till morning," Gale announced, knocking the dust off his hands as he wandered back to his bedroll. "Your turn on watch, Wyll."

The next day, Gale was given the honor of staying at the campsite to watch their captive. He protested valiantly that the snare spell in combination with an alarm spell could be used to keep the vampire immobile and alert them if it were to somehow escape, but Wyll was steadfast that someone should stay. As he had slept through his watch, Lae'zel supported not bringing him to explore the abandoned crypt that was first on their itinerary. Discipline was essential, especially in hostile territory.

As she expected, the crypt contained looters, guardians and traps aplenty. They also found a desiccated undead creature that spoke in riddles. It offered to join them in their camp to provide assistance in their adventures, for a price. Lae'zel loathed mercenaries, but was outvoted in this. They returned to the camp and had a decadent second meal, with the sky not even darkening. Wyll asked the mercenary—Withers—what services he might offer. In return, he was offered grandiose claims of restoring life for coin, of plucking servants to join their party from the ranks of the dead. Ludicrous lies. Shadowheart clearly agreed with her, and even Gale raised a skeptical eyebrow.

Wyll offered no commentary, but asked: "You describe great power. Would you be able to intercede in an infernal bargain? The vampire spawn we encountered yesterday is tied up in some magic that bars it from leaving this plane."

"Also tied up in some rope," Gale cut in. "That's not related to the bargain."

Withers steeped his fingers and looked at the vampire. "I see of which you speak," he said slowly. "But a contract made by two signatories can only be annulled by those signatories. I have no place in this bargain, however it twists the rights of the dead."

Which was, of course, a very confusing way of saying no. Withers did not stay in camp, but promised he would come if called in the future. Lae'zel thought that was perhaps a decision made after realizing he would be left to entertain the wizard.

They set off again afterwards to scour the woods for the druid encampment and then scour the encampment for clues. Very little useful progress was made at the encampment, though they cleaved through a number of goblins in a satisfying fight and Lae'zel forced the location of a Githyanki sighting out of one of the refugees. Wyll was more distracted even than Gale would have been, swearing himself to more obligations on behalf of druid and refugee alike from the moment they set foot within.

Lae'zel emphasized, again, the importance of finding the creche immediately. The istik pretended to understand, pretended they understood the horrors of what would happen to them, and then turned aside to throw themselves into a fight against harpies on the beach to protect an k'chakhi child that had wandered into their song. They were forced back to camp after Shadowheart exhausted her healing abilities on restoring the maimed child and the injuries Wyll had taken from being knocked off a cliff into the water. They were running out of time. Gale had said seven days and they had wasted two. The herbalist at the grove had no ability to help, only a poison they could take to spare themselves the effort of a blade.

That night, Shadowheart suggested giving their vampire to the druids for safekeeping. Gale immediately jumped on the suggestion.

"You would be much better off with me at your side, rather than rotting here at camp. Not that I mind the life of improvisational chef and prison guard, but if you had a second spellcaster to hand, Shadowheart would be able to focus on healing while I dealt with simple tasks like silencing harpies."

That set off another argument over the tactics in the harpy fight. Curiously, Wyll did not point out the fact that he was a spellcaster in his own right. Lae'zel had seen him throw force magic

at the harpies when she and Shadowheart were both engaged on the beach. He did not make optimal use of his abilities, preferring to use only the blade unless he was forced to deal magic. More secrets she did not care about, dulling their edges when they should be driving like a spear towards the creche and their salvation.

When the argument finally wound its way back towards the question of leaving the vampire with the druids, Wyll predictably argued against. “After what we’ve seen today, I don’t trust Kagha. What if she were to set him free to attack the tiefling children?”

“She would not need to do that. She has a snake already,” Lae’zel explained.

“I think Wyll means, what if she staged a massacre, with our vampire as the weapon,” Gale said. “Do you really think this woman is that far round the bend? Even if she hates the refugees, there’s no reason to attack them. And druids are not fans of the undead, generally.”

“I don’t know what she’s capable of, and that is why I do not think we should entrust her with any secrets or weapons,” Wyll said.

“Or perhaps you’re worried she’d not be soft enough on your pet vampire,” Shadowheart said.

“Please stop calling him that, Shadowheart.”

Gale clapped his hands together. “I think we could enjoy this delicious stew, settle into our cozy bedrolls in our snug new nightclothes—thank you for picking this up, Wyll, it’s an excellent fit—and have any future arguments in the morning. The vampire has been safely trussed up for the night, the alarm spell will ring if anything but us ventures in or out of the area near the snare, nobody even has to take shifts to sleep. I, for one, intend to enjoy a full night’s rest. Hopefully everyone will be less cranky in the morning.”

Lae’zel dreamt of being held in front of her first year classmates at the creche, all of them children. She was bound in a snare spell, upside down with the blood flooding to her head, as the sa’varsh explained the process of ceremorphosis. She could feel the change begin to happen in time with the instructor’s words, her bones crackling and her skin burning. She begged them to please, please, see to their duty and save her from defilement. Her classmates just stared at her, eyes blank and without mercy.

She was awoken by the revolting feeling of the worm in her head twisting, attempting to connect to one of the others. She bared her teeth and forced it down. She set her mind into a wall, her will into a sword, impenetrable and ready to strike back at any incursion. At last it settled. She lay there and waited for sleep to return to her. The flames had died down again and the clouds of insects that filled the woods were an alien chorus in the night air. Everything on this planet was so noisy, so alive. It was immensely distracting. She opened her eyes and stared up at the stars, waiting for the dream to claim her again.

There was the muted sound of steel sliding against leather. She rolled over to find Wyll kneeling beside the trapped circle, a dagger in his hand. He set the dagger to the knot at the back of the vampire’s head and began to saw at the rope.

She walked up behind him. He did not notice her.

She wrapped her arm around his neck. He did not look up.

She wrenched him backwards, bringing them both to the dirt in near-silence. Wyll stared up at her, face passive and uncomprehending. The ghaik magic still had him, had snared his mind and confused his purpose. She looked up at the vampire.

It flinched, and she could feel the worm in her head shift and shudder in response to its. There was a tension in her mind, one she recognized from the presence she had felt before. Taking the knife from Wyll's slack grip, she walked to the edge of the trap and set the tip of the blade beside the vampire's left eye. "Release him," she hissed.

The vampire stared at her, blinking rapidly against the nearness of the knife. Its head nodded, minutely. The pressure eased; the worm gave one final wiggle. Behind her, Wyll made a noise of confusion.

"Good," Lae'zel said. She twisted her fingers into the rank curls on the vampire's head to brace it and leaned slightly forward on the knife. "If you touch that worm again; if you try to read us or manipulate us, I will use this knife to dig the ghaik infestation out of your brain."

"Lae'zel?" Wyll whispered.

"What did the vampire make you see?" Lae'zel asked, curious.

"I didn't…it all looked the same. But I wanted to let it free," Wyll said, sounding disgusted. "It *used* me."

Perhaps she had been wrong the night before. Perhaps a little mercy was too much mercy, for a creature like this. Wyll's kindness hadn't bought it's loyalty after all.

"A mistake it will not repeat," Lae'zel said. "Do you understand, thrall? Or must I demonstrate my sincerity?" She angled the knife to dig the tip into the delicate flesh between its nose and eye. For once, Wyll didn't protest. The others shifted, but didn't wake. They would all die in an ambush someday for their lack of reflexes.

The vampire spoke beneath the gag, but made no attempt to move against the knife. She lifted it away to allow it to nod. The dagger's tip was bloodless. "Remember my oath," Lae'zel told it. "I will not give you another chance."

Wyll retreated away from the fire to the makeshift tent he had claimed as his own, arms wrapped tightly around himself. She wondered if this was his first experience being manipulated so intimately. His psionic defenses clearly needed much improvement, and she would be sure to emphasize this in the morning. Until then, there was no need to wake the others. She would stay on watch until the morning and see if her allies could be talked now into dumping the vampire in the Chionthar.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who commented on chapter one, y'all are so sweet 💕

This fic isn't beta'd so if you see any egregious typos feel free to let me know! Otherwise I'd love to hear what you think. You can find me here or on tumblr at notwhelmedyet. If you're a guest commenter who's been cut off by the current anti-spam measures I can totally hook you up with an invite code if you reach out there 🖖

Chapter 3: Astarion

Chapter Notes

> Welcome to the chapter in which Astarion judges people's fashion choices and panics for 4,000 words. I'm sorry/you're welcome?

His whole damn life he had been walking deeper into a labyrinth of decisions he couldn't take back, debts he couldn't repay. It shouldn't have come as such a miserable disappointment that leaving Baldur's Gate hadn't touched his ability to find the worst possible option in every moment and take it but—gods.

He had been free. For a few minutes between the mindflayer ship and having his head cut off on the beach, he had been free.

The sun had kissed his skin. Cool water had wrapped around him like a long-forgotten lover. His mind had been—or at least seemed—his own. The compulsions that had been sewn into his skin were gone. He could run. Could gorge himself on blood and slake the hunger carved into him. There had been a human on the beach within crawling distance, choking on blood with wounds from the crash.

He had thought it lucky chance. He had thought there wouldn't be any other survivors. It had been a flying monstrosity, on fire, that fell from the sky. His survival had been assured, but he hadn't figured on any other immortals or undead that could shrug off a tumble from hundreds of feet in the air. He'd forgotten about magic, because he could never *think* when he was starving. In his muddied, sun-blinded mind, his only thought was that the human was dying. That, if he hurried, he could find out what living blood tasted like.

It tasted like *life*. Like everything he had forgotten in the world. It had spilled out into the water and been wasted and he should have known better, should have known better than to think he could have something good without paying the price.

The other survivors of the crash had hated him on sight. He'd lost his only real chance to free himself when the damn Sharran woke up before he could take a second swallow of her lifeblood. His struggles against the inevitable had only turned them further against him, and he knew they were teetering now on the inevitable decision that even keeping him hostage and half-dead wasn't enough assurance that they'd vanquished him. His possible futures were bandied about at camp casually, because they thought him below speech.

The green alien soldier was uninterested in keeping prisoners from the start and had argued strongly in favor of lobotomizing him that morning over breakfast. The secretive Sharran cleric had barely lost a sip of blood and was still ready to rend him limb from limb. The

wizard was interested in how the tadpole was keeping him alive in the sunlight and growing terrifyingly bored stuck on camp duty. And Wyll—

The warlock and monster hunter kept calling him “feral”, and he hated it. Pigeons were feral. Dogs that ran around the outer city of Baldur’s Gate stealing offal from slaughterhouses were feral. The word implied domestication. Astarion may have been caged for two hundred years, but he was never *domesticated*.

Wyll spoke with great confidence about vampire spawn—that they could walk on walls and regenerate near instantly from injuries. That they could charm people and had the strength of five men. That they were always mad, always hungry, mindless except for the cunning they used to trap and kill their victims. Astarion didn’t know what poorly sourced book he was getting all of this nonsense from. Wyll was incomprehensible, claiming that he would never allow torture and then allowing them to send him into hellfire again in a single breath. Astarion had thought it all an act—chivalry as a front for the darker hungers of a monster hunter. Then he’d thought perhaps it was real. That Wyll would bestow mercy upon any wretched creature in Faerûn, except Astarion. Or perhaps it was for any creature except monsters, and Astarion’s lot fell below beasts.

Lae’zel had so helpfully explained how Wyll was trying to condition him, train him like he were some sort of dog. Like he didn’t know mercy was for people. He wished he’d refused the gag and ripped into the flesh of Wyll’s palms, so sweet and heady and soft. It would have cost him, but it would have been worth it to make Wyll bleed. But in that moment, he’d just wanted it to *stop*.

Out of options and too weak to slip the ropes the wizard had used, he had tried to use the tadpole. He’d felt it before. The way emotions and images could sing between those wretched worms. He’d thought he could harness that power, shift his captors away from their worst impulses. Convince Lae’zel that he would be safer above water, not trapped with the darkness of the Chionthar pressing down on him like a tomb. But her mind was a locked door, and so was the wizard’s, and—he’d thought maybe he could turn Wyll’s own machinations on him, soften him up to Astarion. Make him argue for him; keep him out of the river and the clutches of evil druids. Keep all of his limbs attached. He’d been afraid that if he waited longer to try, he wouldn’t be able to string together the coherent thought necessary for the attempt. Perhaps coherent thought had spilled out on the beach somewhere, days ago.

But there was something wrong with Wyll’s brain. Something had gotten to him first and broken down the doors. Clawed jagged rents across metaphorical portraits on the walls and shattered the glassware and left him raw and open and *wrong*. Astarion had recognized the smell of it and known that there was no chance of getting Wyll on his side. Had pushed him instead—so malleable, so used to being steered by others' hands—to free Astarion. Had failed. And that was the end of it.

He was a damned fool, and an idiot, and he hated most of all that Cazador had been right. That even without the compulsions that had bound his tongue, no person would have taken pity on him. He was a monster, after all.

Time passed in hazy waves of hunger gnawing on his bones, the sky draped with clouds that slid shimmering across its surface. Left alone at camp again, Gale had decided to turn his

underworked mind to new methods of caging vampires. At least he could touch the earth again. Being suspended upside down for hours had made it impossible to swallow down the saliva that pooled in his mouth from the hunger, and the damned leather in his mouth made it impossible to spit. Not that he wanted to be a wretched urchin that spat on the ground. At least on his back he didn't feel like he was drowning. The downside was that Gale's new technique seemed very difficult to escape, and he *needed* to escape.

They had seven days before they turned into mindflayers, according to Gale. This was the third day. Astarion had four days of potential freedom left. And he was wasting them, tied up like an animal, inches from freedom.

He didn't know what would happen when that time ran out. The mindflayer transformation consumed the body and mind—did that count as death? Perhaps it would eat his soul as well and prevent it from being sent down to the Hells to pay Cazador's debts. He had never been allowed to read the contract his master made with his mysterious benefactor, but he couldn't imagine what Cazador could have promised a devil except Astarion's soul. Certainly, he would never have bargained with his *own* soul. The empty space in his chest where his heart should have been ached. His mind twisted away from the future.

Gale had bent one of the tent stakes into an arch that morning, with a great deal of cursing. The women had been highly amused; it had been the highlight of an otherwise unpleasant morning, mostly notable for repeated threats to lobotomize him if his tadpole so much as wriggled. They had laid Astarion down, out beyond the tents, and Gale fitted the hoop over his neck, and then cast a gravity-altering spell that made the loop impossible to lift. Immovable object, Gale had called it, one of those esoteric wizard spells they loved to gossip about in their little wizard classes. Gale had been quite pleased with the results, even untied Astarion's hands and encouraged him to try and free himself for Gale's amusement. He left the gag in for fear of Astarion's single cantrip, presumably. Astarion would have torn it free, but his fingers no longer had the coordination to loosen knots.

Gale had retreated some twenty paces to the center of camp, a distance the party had collectively decided was out of range of tadpole tampering, and had spent most of the day monologuing. Arguing that his new wizardly methods of vampire containment were foolproof and that certainly nobody needed to sit and babysit vampires contained in such a manner.

Astarion worried the others might agree. They were idiots and fools and he hated them, but so far their violence had been predicable, direct responses to his actions. They only tortured him through ignorance, otherwise. If he were quiet and still and acted a good corpse, perhaps his last days wouldn't involve any more hellfire.

While it didn't weigh up to the unpleasantness promised by Lae'zel's plans of lobotomy and riverbed tombs, being left alone and skewered to the ground in a land apparently beset with goblins, undead servitors, malevolent druids, and hungry wildlife was a stomach-churning thought. A bloody big crow had landed on the ground near him at one point and hadn't stopped staring at him until his thrashing had roused Gale enough to shoo it off. Memories of crows picking over the bodies of hanged prisoners, pecking out their eyes, had been haunting the backs of his eyelids ever since.

He should have just been a good corpse from the start. He should have been an obedient pet. He should have fought harder the first time Wyll gagged him, gotten out enough words to catch the man's sympathy. He should have ripped out Shadowheart's throat before she would wake to scream. He shouldn't have tried to use a firebolt cantrip—the attempt was simply a reflex he had never suppressed. He hadn't been fed enough to fuel the magic in two hundred years. Cazador had, most of the time, thought it very amusing that he still tried.

He had been free. He had been free, and he had fucked it all up.

The iron tent pole was rough against his neck, and he needed to stop moving against it. He had rubbed through the skin hours ago, raw muscle twitching against the cool air. He wouldn't have been strong enough to pry it out of the ground, enchantment or no. Even Cazador would have given him a rat by now. Seven deaths and no fresh blood. It was going to start cannibalizing his bones for fuel the next time they killed him, there wasn't anything else to burn. Cazador had needed him on his feet, able to bring back prey. After the first frenzy of testing, he had become methodically practical about when and how to kill Astarion. About making sure he would be able to perform when his punishment was over.

If he hadn't walked out into the sun and tried to die all those years ago, he could have been dead right now.

The waves of draped-silk clouds were darkening to madder and marigold-dyed hues of red and orange when he heard the rest of his captors approaching up the path. They had been arguing over whether to visit the Gith crèche and locate the magical healing machine Lae'zel promised lay within when they left. The unfamiliar raised voice that had joined them did not sound Gith—that accent was lower-city.

Astarion tried to sort his thoughts into a semblance of order, tried to force his hands away from the metal stake. He shouldn't look like he was trying to escape. It might make them angry. It made him look mindless, rubbing his fingers to bone when there was no chance of escape. He tried to pretend there was a compulsion on him, holding his limbs still, holding him back from moving. He'd had two hundred years to master self-restraint, and still he could never stop struggling.

The newcomer was, sure enough, not a Gith. It was a massive tiefling, red skin seeming to crackle with flames and her chest pulsing with light. There were bits of metal poking out through her skin around the leather…garment strapped around her. Her clothes appeared to be made entirely of buckles, belts, and randomly shaped scraps of black leather, sewn together by a farsighted half-wit with a fetish for rivets. She had a single broken horn, which seemed familiar. Wasn't that how Wyll had described the terrible, treacherous demon general they'd planned to slay? That couldn't be right; a general of the Hells wouldn't walk with such a *spring* in their step. Like they were a half-step away from breaking into a song-and-dance routine. They wouldn't lovingly inventory trees and tents and Gale's cookpot with their eyes, the look on their face rapturous.

The smile dropped away when she saw Astarion, fled like the night-watch with a handful of coins pressed into their palms.

"What," she pointed at Astarion, "is that."

“It’s a vampire,” Lae’zel said. “They consume the blood of mortals.”

“You lot didn’t mention keeping some kind of—” the tiefling stumbled over the word “—slave. Mates, I thought you were good guys. What the Hells?”

Lae’zel made a *tch* sound. “A slave would imply it was useful in some way. The vampire is our prisoner because we cannot kill it, and Wyll will not let us set it free or render it harmless some other way.”

“It murdered one of the crash survivors,” Shadowheart said. “And it tried to kill me in the night. Last night it tried to enthrall Wyll.”

Tried. Ha! Anyone could have succeeded in enthralling Wyll; he was two-thirds thrall to begin with.

“I’m sorry, Karlach,” Wyll said, finally catching up to the other two. He looked truly miserable, even worse than he’d looked in the morning, recounting how Astarion’s plans had almost succeeded. “I was so caught up with—I forgot to warn you. Lae’zel speaks true. We captured a vampire at the crash site and we’ve been stuck with it ever since. It can’t be killed due to infernal magic. I know it looks bad, but I swear to you that it’s a monster. We’re trying to keep everyone safe.”

The tiefling—Karlach—stared at Astarion. She looked at his ruined shirt, the pathetic way his hands were wrapped around the iron bar, the mess those savages had made of his hair. He stared back at her, fear and hope warring inside him and finally plunging him into stillness. Here was another one of Wyll’s monsters, who had apparently succeeded in winning her freedom and the rest of their loyalties.

“I don’t think I can trust your word on this, soldier,” Karlach said. “I’m sorry, Wyll, you seem like you want to be a decent person. But today? Don’t ask me to trust your judgment on who’s a monster.”

She stomped across the camp, unhooking a greataxe with a blade the size of Astarion’s head from over her shoulder. Wyll and Gale scrambled after her—Gale attempting to explain that this was a very clever, very humane method of keeping vampires from attacking anyone; Wyll attempting to explain that Astarion had killed a man on that damned beach. Lae’zel and Shadowheart hung back, watching from a safe distance.

Astarion watched the axe until she dropped it on the ground near his head. Harmless, several feet away, rather than blade-first across his throat. From up close, he could tell the fire wasn’t illusion magic—she felt blazingly hot, like a sentient bonfire had knelt beside him. Her eyes darted over him, cataloging his injuries. Maybe he did look so pathetic that the others seemed guilty of vampire abuse for leaving him like this—who knew? Maybe the tiefling had a soft touch.

“I can’t touch you without burning you, right now,” she said. “Mechanic in the grove said the infernal engine Zariel fitted me with is designed like shit, gone haywire since I escaped the Hells. But you just hold on, okay, Fangs? We’re going to figure this out.” She looked up at Wyll and Gale. “Somebody get that damned gag off.”

“He can cast firebolt,” Gale protested.

“Vampire spawn lie, Karlach. You won’t get the truth by talking to him,” Wyll said. “And I don’t know what we’ll do if he charms you somehow.”

“Well, you could always try killing me again; you got pretty far the first time. I'm not worried. I’ve been lied to by Zariel herself and my brain’s still right where it belongs,” Karlach said, thumping her knuckles against her forehead. “And if he wants to try burning me with firebolt he can try, but I’m pretty flame-resistant. Might tickle a little. Gag off, boys.”

“Karlach, he *ate* someone,” Wyll protested.

“I’ve eaten people,” Karlach announced, loudly. Everyone stared at her, and she threw her hands up in the air. “What! I was in the Hells for ten years! Do you think they have bakeries there? Everyone there is a demon, a devil, or a dead person getting juiced for energy—they don’t serve food for mortals down there, and I’m still mortal. Course they were usually dead before I got to them, but sometimes Zariel…look. It sucked. I hated it. I’m really hoping you’re not about to change your minds about killing me, because whatever’s cooking over there smells *amazing*. But if you starve in the Hells…Zariel wouldn’t…you don’t know what that’s like.”

Silence hung over them, like six feet of dirt on top of a coffin. He couldn’t make out most of their expressions from where he was laying, but Karlach looked fragile and vulnerable, and what a *chump*. That was a secret she should have taken to her Bhaal-damned grave.

“That shouldn’t have happened to you,” Wyll said fiercely.

“Wyll’s right,” Shadowheart said. “You did what you had to do, and—it’s not your fault you were in the Hells.”

“Why was she in the Hells?” Gale asked. “And who is this?”

Lae’zel said: “Her employer sold her to a devil. Karlach was Wyll’s target, but no longer. They have reached an accord.”

“I see! Right, of course, Karlach. Sorry, I’ve been stuck at camp, and it’s been—I’m a bit behind on everything. I’m Gale of Waterdeep. Damned sorry to hear about the, uh, everything that seems to have happened to you.”

Karlach waved. “Good to meet you, Gale. Sorry for, uh, unloading about the cannibalism before introducing myself. It’s been awhile since I had to people with *people*, ya know?”

“Astonishing lack of good company in the Hells, I am sure,” Gale said.

“You can say that again,” Karlach said. She looked back down at Astarion, and the smile fell back off her face. He cringed away from her, but of course there was nowhere to go. “But that’s not my point. I know what it’s like to starve, and—gods, just look at him. Ain’t nobody’s wrist should be that skinny.”

They were all looking at him now, and he hated it. So sweet of Karlach to announce his weakness to the crowd of idiots whose favorite collective hobby was cutting his head off. He squeezed his eyes shut rather than look at them.

“The vampire isn’t like you, Karlach. The hunger—it makes them go mad. Feral spawn can’t control themselves.”

“Which is it, Wyll? Is Fangs an animal? Or is he a conniving monster that can twist our thoughts and charm a girl at thirty paces? I don’t see how it can be both.”

“An animal can be cunning, any hunter knows that,” Wyll said.

Laughter caught in his throat. *Cunning!* Everything might be shit, but apparently the monster hunter thought more highly of him than his siblings ever had.

“I don’t care,” Karlach said. “Starving him is wrong, no matter how smart he is. He’s practically a skeleton, Wyll. Tell me he looked like that when you captured him the first time.”

There was the sound of footsteps, and Lae’zel said: “It didn’t. It looked softer before, less dry.”

“It’s easier to contain if it’s weaker,” Shadowheart said.

“It’s *wrong*,” Karlach snarled.

“I admit, it does look a bit…corpse-like,” Gale added, very helpfully.

“You’re right, Karlach,” Wyll said.

Hands on the back of his head startled him out of his spiraling panic. He flinched, and Karlach made a soothing noise, a deep throated hum that could have rattled your bones if she was holding you. He opened his eyes to find Wyll easing the leather bit from his mouth, running his fingers over the toothmarks Astarion had been digging into it.

“There are five of us now, against one spawn,” Wyll said. “We have the power to hold it without treating it cruelly. And I don’t—as long as most of us stay out of range of the tadpole’s effects, the others can subdue us if necessary. Speak to it if you wish, Karlach; let it make up whatever lies it will.”

Astarion ran his tongue over the roof of his mouth, testing the spots where the leather had dug into delicate flesh. The edges of his mouth were cut raw, but he wouldn’t bleed unless he was fed. He just had to make his case, and maybe—maybe—someone would let him have some blood.

Should he play for pity? He didn’t think Wyll would buy anything he tried to sell at this point. He couldn’t say that he’d been dying without that man’s blood; they were all painfully aware how little good death did him. The truth, that he had no thoughts in his head at all, would hardly go down well. An act of mercy? It would have been more merciful to let the man die before he started nibbling. He could be reformed, though. He could have learned

how vile and wrong it was to kill people from their moral instruction and be willing to comply with anything, any condition, to be allowed a rat or mouse or *something*.

Maybe the tiefling would steal him and he could escape her later. Maybe he could at least convince them he wasn't some sort of beast.

He tried to take a deep breath, got caught on his ruined throat, and ended up making a pathetic whistling noise instead.

"Shit," Karlach said. "Shadowheart, would you get your ass over here and heal him? He's not going to be able to talk with his lungs leaking air like a sieve."

"I'd rather not," Shadowheart said.

Karlach looked at her. Shadowheart turned away. "I'm not asking you do it for him, I'm asking you do it for me, okay?"

"Fine," Shadowheart said. "But when it rips *your* throat out and I've wasted the last of my spell slots, don't blame me." She walked over and laid her hand on Astarion's chest. He tried not to flinch. The healing magic was worse than usual, sinking into him like something cold and wet; the pain muffled like a limb gone numb in ice water. It felt wretched, but at least it didn't burn like hellfire. The moment seemed to last forever—when he opened his eyes again, he found Shadowheart clenching her teeth, face scrunched up like she'd been afflicted with terrible constipation. He could still feel her magic in him, shifting around like ice on the Chionthar.

"You okay, Shadowheart?" Wyll asked. Okay, maybe it was taking too long in real time, not just in his head.

"I've never healed an undead before," Shadowheart said through gritted teeth. "It's harder. The body doesn't *want* to be healed the same way the living do. Shut up and let me concentrate."

After an interminable few minutes of silence, Shadowheart finally lifted her hands from his chest. The cartilage in his neck had righted itself with an ice-numbed pop, and the stab wounds felt similarly numb. Hopefully they'd closed up. She still had that constipated look on her face, staring at his chest. "It doesn't have a heart," she said. "It's just empty in there."

"Really?" Karlach asked. "Samesies!"

Astarion ran his tongue over desert-dry lips. "It was the price. The devil wanted it. I think." He couldn't remember what happened to the heart after Cazador had cut it out of him, the scene fogged over in the pain of *burning*, his soul on fire. "My—my master took it out."

They stared at him. He had spent two hundred years learning to read people, to know when they were content with their lot, when they might be greedy enough to want more, when they needed coaxing to be led into the night, when they needed advance payment. He should have been able to manipulate these fools, but the thoughts weren't running clearly. He felt half

blind, unable to read what their expressions might mean, unable to count the cards he needed to win his freedom.

“Bloody hell, I’m sorry, Fangs.” Karlach set her hand on her chest. “That happened to me too—Zariel took out my heart to put this engine in, make me fight harder for her, make me strong enough to be her champion. It sucked. What were they bartering for?”

“Me. I tried to—I wanted it to stop. I just wanted it to stop. I should have jumped off a bridge, where there was nobody to pull me back. Impulse control. I was always bad at—I can be good now, though. Whatever you want, I can be good.” He wasn’t making any sense. He’d never been able to tell anyone anything before, and now he didn’t know how. If there’d been any moisture left in his desiccated body, he would have started crying. Pathetic.

“Oh,” Karlach said. “Oh, fuck. *Fuck.*”

“You can’t make infernal bargains on someone else’s behalf,” Gale protested. “Otherwise, people would be sending their enemies to the Hells all the time. There’d be no wizards left in Blackstaff Academy.”

“Well, it fucking happened to me, so it’s not impossible,” Karlach said.

“That was service, not a contract,” Wyll said. “But a vampire spawn is enthralled to its sire. I’ve never heard of it happening, but…Devils have no compunctions about slavery, of thinking of people as possessions. It’s not impossible.” For a man who was pretending not to be a warlock, he certainly talked a lot about devil magic.

“Hey, hey,” Karlach said gently. “What’s your name, Fangs?”

Fucking finally. It was hard to hate any epithet more than Cazador's favored “boy”, but “the vampire” was becoming a close second. “Astarion.”

“Astarion,” she repeated. “Could you heal Astarion the rest of the way, Shadowheart? The burns and shit?”

“That was the last of my higher magic,” Shadowheart said. “There’s nothing more I can do until I rest.”

“Well, shit. Could someone get us some water? Feels cruel making a guy talk when his throat sounds like that. What else do you need, Astarion? What would make this easier?”

He squeezed his eyes shut rather than look at her. She was terribly sincere looking, and that was going to make it worse when the cost came due. People didn’t act like this, not unless they wanted something. He shouldn’t ask for anything; he knew the accusations of attempting to manipulate Karlach, of trying to charm her with whatever mythological vampire skills Wyll thought he possessed were coming. He shouldn’t ask. His skull was pounding. “Besides blood?” he asked.

“Well, I think that one goes without saying,” Karlach said. “Anything else?”

Goes without saying. She wanted to feed him. He was going to ruin this somehow, he was going to ruin everything if he opened his mouth. He shook his head, not willing to suggest that he'd feel much better if he could sit up and take a bath and wash his clothes and get a spare needle and thread to sew up the cuts and curl up next to the fire. That if she wanted to feed him, he would be happy to be stolen, they could leave the rest of these fools behind, that if she wanted to have him, he could survive being burned quite badly. He couldn't risk ruining it by asking for anything more, not until the blood she was offering was either in his mouth or revealed to be a cruel trick.

Chapter 4: Karlach

Chapter Notes

> Okay so several people commented on the last chapter that they were very excited to see the main cast discuss their feelings over the revelations of last chapter & repent their many sins but unfortunately 👀 Karlach says no interrogating the vampire till he gets his snackies.
>
> In this chapter, Karlach will narrate (leading to an unavoidable major tonal shift because: it's Karlach) and Wyll's horrible no-good very bad day will get even worse.
>
> also I tried my best at the no caps title but I couldn't handle it, we're back to regular capitalization XD

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Fear made people stupid, Karlach knew that. She wasn't some expert on vampire lore, she wasn't the Blade, maybe they really could do all that wild shit Wyll said they could. And if she'd seen the vamp eating someone on the beach she probably would've reacted the same way, because she was going to be good now, and good people saved innocents.

But where in the rules did it say they had to stop there? Couldn't they help the fucked-up people too, if they got the chance?

Because it was all kinds of fucked up, what had happened to Astarion. Turned into a vampire, enslaved by some asshole, sold out to a devil to stop him from escaping into death. But that magic had given them all a second chance. Astarion ate a guy, he got killed for it; Karlach figured they were all square at that point.

And maybe the others didn't see it that way, but she'd figure something out.

For now, she'd gotten them to remove the damn stake holding him down like some sort of demon sacrifice. Gale had been quick to volunteer to help, and when Astarion had proven too weak to hold a flask of water that had quieted most of the objections. A few rolled up blankets to prop him up had made him look more like a reclining famine survivor and less like a dead body. Gale used prestidigitation first to clear off the blood and grime, which helped a lot.

Astarion wasn't coherent enough to negotiate for future alliances, so Karlach said that would have to wait. Apparently, the Hellish resurrection magic fueled itself by burning your flesh, eating fat and muscle. And fear made people stupid, but Karlach was pretty sure she wasn't the only one here who needed some practice at this whole "being good" business. What he needed was blood to heal the wounds Shadowheart couldn't, start the process of turning him person-shaped again.

She expected another argument over that, and Wyll argued.

Apparently Astarion had used the tadpoles to enthrall him last night. When they asked Astarion what his next step would have been after being untied, he lied very badly. Pretended that he wouldn't have needed to bleed Wyll dry to be able to run. Now that Astarion was talking a little, she'd managed to convince Wyll that he wasn't some kind of animal, whatever his books said. He was willing to admit that perhaps, under the circumstances, Astarion had a good reason to want to escape them. But the business with the tadpole had clearly freaked him out, and the idea of Astarion back at full strength scared him.

But eventually he gave up and surprised her by offering to be the one to hunt something for Astarion. "Obviously, we need to feed him something; I just think there ought to be limits. He's all but admitted that he wants to kill us all. Maybe if we'd done something sooner he wouldn't have…regardless. Whatever you decide regarding Astarion, you should decide amongst yourselves," he said. "There is something you should know, but which I cannot speak of. The consequence of which may be that I will not be able to travel with you further."

"Well, that's cryptic," Shadowheart muttered.

"If there is something we should know, then you must speak of it," Lae'zel said loudly. She abandoned Gale's stewpot, which she had been assigned a turn at minding while Gale helped them settle Astarion.

Gale frowned. "Can't speak, as in you're not sure how to raise the topic? Or as in magic compulsions? If only I had a scroll of detect thoughts…but I think we could use the tadpoles to get much of the same effect. Like we were discussing for interrogating Astarion."

"Unfortunately not." Wyll shook his head. "I've had clerics and wizards attempt to see this truth within my mind before. They were not successful."

"We should not use the ghaik worms, regardless," Lae'zel said. "To use the ghaik magics is to poison ourselves willingly."

"The vampire was able to get into your head last night," Shadowheart said.

Wyll shook his head. "Not all of my mind is protected, just this one secret. It's never saved me from mind manipulation magic, only barred access to what I cannot share. I'm sorry I cannot give you all the truths you deserve."

"He's a warlock," Astarion said from his place on the ground outside their huddle. "You can smell the Hells on him. Infernal magic."

Karlach's eyes snapped to Wyll, and she saw him stiffen, saw the fear that passed over his face. Knew it was true. "Your patron sent you to kill me," she said. "Please tell me you didn't just break your contract, Wyll."

"We cannot talk about this," Wyll said. "It isn't safe. For any of us."

Which: that was a yes. Wyll was a warlock, and he'd broken his contract, and it was all her fault. Gods, he had broken his contract. She thought about Wyll, his beautiful face melted down into the shapeless ooze of a lemure. His mind, reduced to formless agony. Forever. Until he was destroyed, or eaten, or got himself promoted and became a devil himself. *Gods.*

She was crying, and the tears couldn't touch her own face without sizzling and boiling off. Everyone else was trying to get Wyll to say something, accusing him of hypocrisy. He was staring at her, one eye wide. The other one, stone and torn flesh, like something with claws had raked across his face and pulled out his eyeball. *Gods*. She needed to do something. "Everyone shut up!"

She might have lost most of her power when she left Avernus, but she hadn't lost her yelling voice. In the temporary quiet, she said: "If Wyll says we can't talk about this, we can't. A devil can put anything in a warlock's contract, even order them to kill anyone who discovers their contract exists. Wyll, just—are you sure? It's not too late," she nodded at the sword at his hip. "I'd understand. I don't want to die, but…there's worse fates. That's one of them."

His hands balled into fists and—for a moment—she saw the Blade shatter, pure *want* writ across his face. How old was he, anyway? Thirty? He couldn't be much older than her. Old enough to have gotten himself into this mess, but young when he'd taken the deal. A life for a life, right? He'd spared her, she could spare him. They'd be square.

"No," Wyll said. "Thank you, but no." He turned and walked away, picking up a shortbow and quiver from one of the tents before heading off into the trees.

It had been a fucking day. She almost got killed by mercenaries. Then she had to talk this crew out of killing her, and she'd been free! Free and surrounded by decent folks, people who wouldn't stab her in the back for fun or as part of some Hellish powerplay. Then they told her she was going to turn into a mindflayer. Then she discovered they'd been torturing a vampire. And now this. It was too fucking much.

"So his master will destroy him for failing to complete his mission?" Lae'zel asked.

"The typical contract ends with the swearer's soul being cast into the pits of Avernus and either consumed or transformed into a lemure. Mindless slave devils," Gale explained. "I think sometimes the soul is minted into currency, but I don't think that's much improvement."

"It's not," Karlach said. "They just burn forever inside the coin." She preferred to imagine the devils of hell, the souls in the coins, the damned in the pits…couldn't they all be awful people? Couldn't they just be really awful people who deserved it? But Wyll didn't deserve it.

"He made his choice," Shadowheart said. "We should respect that."

"No Githyanki would be allowed to make such a choice, for Vlaakith guides our souls against theft by outsiders. I do not understand why your gods do not protect their people in turn."

"That is a point of great philosophical debate, Lae'zel, but suffice to say—"

She couldn't bear it anymore. "Enough," Karlach said. "We can't help him. I don't know how much time he's got, but it's less than the rest of us. Let's just—let's just be kind tonight, ok?"

Maybe the others could tell how hard she was trying to stop herself from burning again, because they all drifted away after that. Gale went back to his dinner preparations, Lae'zel to cleaning her weapons and gear, Shadowheart to sorting through the goods they'd brought back from the paladins' hideout. Karlach sat back down in the dirt next to Astarion. She wondered how soon dinner would be ready, how soon Wyll would be back, and whether they might get a bite to eat before he was back. She felt a bit guilty wondering about that, which was almost a relief compared to the spine-shattering guilt she felt about everything else.

She'd talked a good game for a minute there, but she was so fucking relieved Wyll had rejected her offer. She didn't know if she could have made good on it. She wanted to be the kind of person who'd do that—who'd offer their life to save someone from eternal torment. But there was talking, and there was doing, and she didn't know if she could have done it.

"You need anything, Fangs?" She asked, trying not to think about that. "More water, maybe? I know it's not your favorite beverage, but it beats nothing."

"I don't know what you want," Astarion rasped. He squinted at her, eyebrows pinched and unhappy.

"Who says I have to want something?"

"Everyone wants something."

"Wyll didn't. Or at least, he didn't want anything selfish more than he wanted to do the right thing," Karlach said. "Spared my life when it would have been right easy to say I was a monster and kill me anyway."

"Good for you," he said. Then: "Fuck. I didn't mean that. Please don't—"

"Fangs, you ain't gotta worry so much," Karlach said. "I've spent the last ten years surrounded by fucking cunts. Devils, mostly. You'd have to work harder than that to offend me." She crossed her legs and leaned her elbows against her knees, tried to make herself a bit smaller. People were scared of her sometimes. Had been ever since she was a kid and started shooting up in height. It had kept her safe, except when it didn't. But she couldn't turn it off and she hated that. Astarion was scared of her, and she didn't know how to turn that off.

Instead, she rambled at him and made things worse. "I've starved before. I get so fucking bitchy when I'm hungry. I tore an imp's arms off once for asking me a stupid question because I was too hungry to think. Turned out to be a messenger from Zariel, so…that was a mistake. Honestly, I'd give you some of my blood but I'm not sure if the engine's doing anything hellish to it. Plus, I think the others might think you'd enthralled me."

"Don't offer things you can't give me," Astarion begged, looking back up at her with those sweet doe eyes of his. Well, they were red, and probably a deer would look less like it wanted to devour you, but still. Pretty. She'd never been especially into guys when she was a

teenager, but damn, turns out years in the Hells would broaden your horizons. Back on the material plane less than a week and she was already making exciting new self-discoveries.

“Soon, soon, I promise,” she said. She tried for soothing, but that wasn’t a skill she’d had a lot of practice with. She wasn’t good at sitting in silence either, despite her best intentions to not interrogate Astarion when he was starving and half-mad with it. When she wasn’t shooting the shit she kept thinking of Wyll, and what was about to happen to him. “We could give it a try if you really want? The engine keeps me pretty hot, but if I got a dagger and a cup, maybe we could give it a go after it cooled down.”

“We shouldn’t,” Astarion said, clearly unable to say *no* to an offering of blood. Which she should have known and shouldn’t be tormenting him with. “We shouldn’t—if someone gets jumpy and cuts my head off again, I am going to bite someone. And I already tried that. Ended poorly.”

“They what?” Karlach squinted. “Which one of them?”

“Don’t—doesn’t matter. I provoked them. Deserved what was coming to me. It’s quick, at least. Nobody here has gotten *creative*.” He shuddered, hands clenching weakly in his lap. His fingertips were still worn ragged where he’d been worrying against the iron hoop, the lack of blood making the details all too easy to see.

She reigned in the anger that made her want to get up and stomp over to the others and pick another fight. That might also make her look like she was enthralled or some shit. Besides, Astarion did try his level best to kill them. Self-defense was fair. And she had to stop asking Astarion questions because he was clearly going to force himself to answer. The seesawing between spite and fawning panic was making her heartsick.

So for the next few minutes, she tried to focus on some good things. The air was a nice temperature. There were bugs singing, more bugs than she’d ever heard in her life. A bat swooped overhead in the dimming sunset, chasing life. Another animal to add to her checklist of “Karlach’s Second Chance: Everything Good in the Universe“. Her thoughts kept trying to turn inwards and she beat them back with a stick. Thought about how beautiful the clouds looked. How good that apple she’d eaten in the Grove had been, the best apple she’d ever tasted in her life. How lucky she was—

She heard Wyll coming back, the crackle of broken twigs in the underbrush. He’d gotten a deer and was dragging it, a rope tied off around its neck. He was sweat-soaked and stumbling and she reached out to steady him, would have burned him if he hadn’t flinched back from her.

She had to say something, but all the words had coiled up and died in her throat. Maybe he was feeling something similar, because all that pretty poetry he’d said earlier didn’t make a reappearance. She carried the deer for him.

“Fangs, we’re back.” She sat down and shifted the deer onto her lap. Its fur was soft, a dappled silver brown. It was still warm. The arrow had caught it through the eye; if you didn’t look at its face it could have been just sleeping.

Astarion's eyes fluttered open again. He caught sight of the deer, and his eyes widened, pupils blackening out the red. Like a cat spotting a mouse. He swallowed a few times. "For me?" he asked. As if there were some other vampire they might be planning on handing off his dinner to.

Wyll kneeled next to her and traced along the deer's neck. "There's an artery here. You might want to lift the body slightly, Karlach, so the blood drains towards the neck. I don't know what the best way to position it is, normally I'd bleed the carcass and field dress it away from camp."

"*Please*." Astarion rolled off his bundle of blankets and onto his belly in a heave of effort, nearly rolling into her. He made a few attempts to lift his head, fingers digging into the dirt and utterly failing to move him further. He made a noise, high-pitched and keening, unable to get himself close enough to bite.

Wyll jolted into motion, wrapping one arm around the vampire's chest and lifting him up towards the deer's neck. He murmured: "Peace, Astarion, just—" while the other hand he slid into those silver curls, supporting his head as he guided his fangs into place. "Okay, now bite."

Astarion bit down. The keening noise stopped, replaced by the wet sounds of sucking and swallowing, half-choking himself with his urgency. It was gross. And probably fucking private, especially since after a few moments Astarion started to make pleased little animal noises in-between swallows. She didn't have a thing for vampires, she did *not. But there was only so much moaning and slurping a girl could take before her extremely desperate hindbrain started making associations.*

Focus, Karlach.

She couldn't see much with Wyll half-crouched over him, but she thought the burns on his hands looked better, so hopefully the blood was doing its job. Astarion didn't look quite so boneless in Wyll's arms either, his hands reaching up to tangle in the deer's pelt. But it seemed too soon when the pleased noises stopped and were replaced again with frantic whining as Astarion gnawed on the thing's neck, biting at it again and again.

"The artery's deeper than that, there's more, don't worry," Wyll said gently. Maybe he had been charmed after all? It was like all of the hostility he'd had for Astarion had gotten lost in the woods somewhere, along with most of Wyll's personality. But Astarion had been right here the whole time and she'd have felt it if his tadpole was wriggling. Probably. Wyll glanced up at Karlach and said, "I think you need to slit its throat so the rest of the blood drains out. Can you reach the knife at my belt?"

She could figure out what was wrong with Wyll later. Or not! Maybe it was the impending doom that was making him weird.

It was awkward to reach Wyll's belt with a deer slung half over her shoulder and him holding Astarion, but she managed. Wyll coached her through it, a single slice across its neck from ear to ear so she'd be sure to hit both arteries. Blood flowed immediately, and they got Astarion latched on. It was less like a dirty copper novel with sexy vampires when there was

deer blood all over him. More like a toddler going face-first into a birthday cake. The rest of the group had wandered over to watch, and she wanted to tell them to stop looking, that nobody should be watching this, but it wasn't like *she* had a leg to stand on.

Wyll kept holding Astarion, fingers gentle in his hair. From Shadowheart and Lae'zel's complaints, she got the impression that maybe Wyll had always felt guilty about what they were doing. That he just needed one more person to push him towards the right kind of *taking care of*. Or maybe the fact that he was going to die and Astarion had also been hurt by the Hells and—fuck. *Fuck.* She'd done such a good job not thinking about it but now she was thinking about it again and it was like the ozone and sulfur smell of Avernus was curling around her brain and—

"Shit. She's coming," Wyll said, and Karlach realized she wasn't imagining it. Their eyes met, and he didn't look blank anymore. She could see him trying to stuff the fear back inside somewhere. He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment and then smiled at her, an awful, twisted imitation of a real smile. "It's not your fault, okay?" he said.

He laid Astarion down as the portal widened, ichor-dark, and some asshole devil rose up from within it. They shook off the shadows with a lazy flap of their wings. Like a dog all covered in mud getting ick on your clean floors. It was a cambion. Blue skin, four horns, ugly dress, shit jewelry, bitchy face.

Mizora.

She looked down on them and smiled, repulsively. "Well, isn't this a charming scene? My pup's gone and got himself a pet of his own. Perhaps that was why you were too distracted to carry out the command I gave you? Too busy breaking in your new bitch?" She lingered over the words, looked them over like their awkward positioning had anything to do with sex and she wasn't just being nasty for her own enjoyment. Astarion had frozen and was staring at her from beneath Wyll.

Karlach dropped the deer and got up, grabbing her axe. "Mizora. You're going to want to watch your mouth, else I have to shut it for you." She couldn't do anything to her now—not while Wyll's contract was in effect. But afterwards? If there was even a speck of a chance she was going to cut her damned head off.

"Karlach. As Zariel has always said, you look much more comely with your mouth closed. She sends her regards, by the way." Mizora fluttered her fingers at her dismissively. Of course it would have been fucking Mizora that Wyll was pacted to. It couldn't be some lesser devil from Dis, or even one of the other Archdevils, Levistus or some shit. It had to be the only fucking cunt of a devil Zariel would keep in the room with her while she—

"Your business here is not with Karlach," Wyll said firmly. "And you had no right to set me after her. She's neither devil nor demon."

"My business here is not for you to decide. Has all my training gone to waste? I thought you'd finally been housebroken, pup. Clearly not broken *enough*." She twirled her hand in the air and then yanked it towards her. Wyll, still on his knees, choked, hands scrabbling for some invisible rope around his neck. "Clearly, I must start again. You will do as you are bid.

You will keep yourself quiet, unless I have need of you. And when I say heel, you *heel*," her hand chopped downwards and Wyll was dragged onto the bloodied ground.

She held him there, his frantic attempts to breathe growing increasingly painful to listen to, until his hands stopped tugging at the collar around his neck. Until he grew too weak to struggle.

Karlach needed to do something. She wanted to kill her. She looked back and found Shadowheart and Lae'zel only barely being held back by Gale, who was talking to them in frantic whispers. He knew the score too—there was no way Wyll's contract would allow an ally to hurt Mizora without damning him.

Finally, Mizora relaxed her hand and Wyll gasped. Breathed again as he lay slumped over Astarion. He was shaking, bloodied foam leaking out of his nose.

Mizora walked over and went to one knee, running her nails over the stubble on the side of his head. "See now, pup, isn't everything better when you do as you're told? Just lie quiet now and listen. Karlach fell within Clause G, Section Nine. She doesn't have a heart. You agreed to hunt the heartless for me. And now Zariel will have to think of another way to fetch her back home, a great inconvenience." Her fingers trailed lower, slotted into the curving scars across his face. She followed the scars up to Wyll's eye. They fit perfectly. Karlach was going to be fucking sick.

Mizora continued, "And to steal someone else's property! Is what I give you not enough? If I'd known you needed entertainment, I could have arranged it. There was no need for you to dirty yourself with Mephistopheles' lab rat. But I suppose a lone pack animal *will* develop behavior problems. Maybe having a bitch of your own will make you more agreeable in the years to come."

"Years?" Wyll rasped.

"Oh, Wyll, did you think we were done here?" Mizora crooned. She tapped the nails of her other hand against his neck, traced a parallel arc to his scars on the other side. Hesitated with those sharp points touching the lower lid of his eye. "You will be so much less fun as a lemure, Wyll. I think that can wait a while longer. But of course, I can't have you thinking there are no consequences for failure."

Her hand rested there, a threat. Karlach felt like she was the one who couldn't breathe now. *She wouldn't, would she? What use would Wyll be to her if she took the other eye? She wanted him to hunt for her.* Wyll shuddered, and the sharp tip of one nail broke skin.

Mizora swiped her fingers through the blood that welled up and finally lifted her hand away. She rubbed the blood between her fingers, smiling. Then she touched her fingers to her lips, the blood between them turning black. There was magic in the air that made your insides twist. "Oh, pet, that's your trouble. You're always worrying about the past," Mizora said, pulling on Wyll's hair to tilt his head up, "instead of preparing yourself for the future."

A drop of blackened blood fell from her fingertip, fell into his one good eye. Wyll didn't even blink as it hit his eye and sizzled, though there were tears mixing with the blood on his face

and Karlach was going to kill her, she was going to find a way to get Wyll out of this pact and fucking kill her—

Black shadow spread out from his eye like a rushing wave, consuming him. Hellfire followed only a moment behind.

Wyll burned.

Chapter End Notes

Oh no....

if you're wondering, I did look up the best way to bleed out a deer and honestly it would have been much more practical for Wyll to do that in the woods and field dress it (apparently it's easiest to get the blood out while the heart is still pumping which...yes that does make sense) but then we wouldn't get Karlach balancing a whole deer on her shoulder like a keg.

Chapter 5: Tadfools

Chapter Notes

Okay so. This whole chapter is a single bit of narration from the game:
You burn in the fires of Avernus; the lightning storms of Dis strike your flesh. Your soul passes through each layer of the Hells, gaining their essence - and their torment.

Because wow! That sure would be something! That would be extremely unpleasant! And yet, in game, Wyll is standing up and snarking about 30 seconds later. His little crop top isn't even singed. I had to do something about that (not the crop top, it's actually perfectly safe in Wyll's pack because in this continuity he never got changed after they arrived back in camp with Karlach)

So, well. Here's the thing. There's really not a lot of plot in this chapter so if gruesome hell torture (special warning for maggots and eye trauma) is not your thing...I will not be offended if you wait and come back next week.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wyll burned and the fire lit him like a beacon, brighter than any mortal flame. The smell sunk into her like a hook, dragging her back to Avernus nose-first. Cooked flesh and burning hair and sulfur. The screaming followed, a shocked moment‘s delay.

It wasn’t just Wyll screaming.

He’d collapsed on top of Astarion.

She couldn’t save Wyll, but she was damned if she was going to let Mizora hurt anyone else because of her. Karlach dropped the axe, tried not to think. Grabbed Wyll by the shoulder and threw him off Astarion.

Her hands *burned*, the way she hadn’t felt since she’d near lost her arm and part of her face to that lava pit near the Watchtower.

When she touched Wyll’s arm the worm in her head shuddered, twisted frantically.

When she let go, it devoured her.

He was in Avernus, sinking into a river of lava. The air was choked with thick grey smoke and the smell of rot and blood. He was burning, and he should be dead and it should be over, but it wouldn’t stop. Every part of him was agony. The lava swallowed him up, molten rock

filling her mouth and burning through her tongue. Then the bottom fell out of the world and she was falling again through lightning-lit skies and choking industrial smoke.

Lae'zel wrenched herself free of the ghaik mind-invader. *She was Githyanki.* She was trained to resist compulsions and psionic attack and to withstand torture and she wasn't burning and her tongue was still in her mouth and she wasn't hurt. She was Githyanki. She was unhurt.

Wyll screamed and she remembered. Wyll's pact, the devil, the flames that had consumed him. Karlach reaching out to move him away from the vampire who burned beneath him and the ghaik worms dragging her down into Wyll's torment. She could only have lost a moment —Wyll still burned, the devil looking down on him in predatory amusement. Everyone else had crumpled, fallen to the ground in agony, trapped within the worm's hold. She would have to pull them out—

She did not *have* to.

If they had failed to learn mental defenses that was no business of hers. Unlike Wyll, she had not been given charge of every mortal on the Sword Coast of Faerûn. He'd told her there were no debts between them. She did not owe these people rescue. Her loyalties were to her orders, her protocols, her people.

Lae'zel got to her feet and went back for Gale.

The first level had been Avernus, molten rivers and fire and blood. The second layer had been Dis. Smog-filled iron cities, the air filled with the thunder of foundries and industry as much as actual thunder. The lightning had eaten into the core of him, leaving him raw and shaking.

He knew this couldn't be real, not in mortal flesh. He would have died in an instant when he first touched the lava of Avernus, not been dragged deeper still into the thick waters of Minauros. Everything smelled of decay and sickly sweetness. He could feel himself rotting in those still waters, losing himself to bits and pieces. He shouldn't have bits and pieces left to lose, he should have melted down to a skeleton, and he knew this wasn't real. But that didn't stop the horrid slime of it from filling his mouth when he tried to breathe, compelled by the unendurable pressure on his lungs as he was dragged down. Deeper still.

He felt arms around him, pulling him down. They must be *Her* arms. If she didn't want him to move then he wouldn't move. He'd gotten so good at that. Being still so she could hurt him however she wanted. She didn't normally need to touch him to make him move though, she didn't need stoop to that indignity. She could just reach inside and *make him*, however she wanted.

The arms tightened and something wriggled in his head. Mystra, he hoped there hadn't been anything alive in that water. He'd already had one parasite inserted into his skull, he didn't need a second one to—

Wait.

The tadpoles. Their inextricable little passengers, who so loved to share things that ought be private.

He couldn't remember *how* he'd ended up in the Hells and surely such a thing would be memorable. It seemed like the kind of thing he would remember, if this wasn't a worm-induced shared hallucination. And now that he was considering the possibility, the arms wrapped around him seemed notably more tangible than everything else. A hand patted him on the face. It didn't hurt the way it should if half his flesh had rotted away.

Someone slapped him and Gale's eyes flew open. Lae'zel kneeling over him, wearing her—incredibly uncomfortably looking—evening clothes. She locked eyes with him with her normal intensity. Which was very intense. "Guard your mind, wizard," she hissed.

Which for her was practically polite, and likely good advice, so he did as the good Gith warrior bade him. It was unfamiliar to shield himself from mental intrusions coming from within. Generally one worried about psychic attacks and mystic forces that originated outside one's own brain, but he managed the esoteric form. When his wards were in place, he sat up to find that Lae'zel had dragged or carried him clear across camp. They'd discussed the proximity effects of the tadpoles that morning, she must have thought it would help to move him further away from the epicenter of the disturbance.

Speak of the devil—well, not the devil per se. The devil's warlock. Wyll was no longer actively burning, which would have been a relief but that he'd been left a smoking, charred corpse. Presumably he wasn't actually dead. The devil had said she still had plans for him. And his tadpole was clearly still alive and screaming, because Shadowheart and Karlach, their new tiefling friend, were still on the ground making horrible noises. The vampire was making noises too, but he was no more or less on the ground than he'd been before the hellfire incident began.

"My thanks for the rescue," he said, because his mother would be terribly disappointed if he forgot his manners to a rescuer, no matter how grim and martinet they were. "I suppose we will have to fetch Shadowheart next?" He very much did not want to get up off the ground and wade back into the swamp muck of Minaurus, but it was only common decency.

Lae'zel gritted her teeth. "If you insist, I will fetch the cleric. You will not move. I will not drag you back a second time."

He watched her stomp back across the battlefield of their campground and thought that Lae'zel probably *would* drag him back a second time, if he needed it. She was exceedingly unpleasant, but she always did seem to have your back when it counted.

She did not know why the Dark Lady was doing this. It was not for her to know, or to question, but the not-knowing unsettled her. Was this a test of her devotion? Or was it a punishment? She remembered no slights, no infractions against her Lady, but perhaps she had erred without realizing.

She couldn't remember being punished like this before. She remembered very little of the time before her mission. Removing her memories was needful. It kept her focused. It removed distractions. It let her be a more perfect tool to be wielded in Her service. But now she didn't know if this had happened before: if she was returning to an old trial or had been granted a new chance to prove herself. It didn't matter if she knew. It wasn't for her to question. But she wondered.

Pain was to be endured, and learned from. But as she slid downwards, ever downwards, from a world of rot and decay into the torment of fire again, she found she could not endure both the pain and her questions. So she let them go, let Shadowheart go, and let herself become pain embodied. Pain asked no questions, it did only as it was bid. The flames would have it burn, and the body was consumed. Flesh seared together, blood boiled and the soft liquid of her eye melted down her face in rivulets. The pain had a different flavor than the rotting that had preceded it, sharper and more insistent. The other pain had seemed to call for sleep, call for surrender of all things.

The fire was followed by ice cold water that burned through flesh as insistently as the flames it followed and stole breath and swallowed screams. There were fingers again to claw at the ice that covered the surface of the world. There was an eye to see the light above, see it fade as lungs filled with water and weighed her down into the depths. She did not need to question these things. She was the pain and it was all encompassing, an embrace. It did not need to destroy the body, only keep it and secret it away where it could be stored and treasured in its arms forever. It would hold tight and never let go—

There was another pain, another layer adding to the symphony her Lady created. A rattling sensation, sharp impact against her face. Oddly mild, if it was meant to add to the agony of the mindscape tortures but that was not for her to question. If Shar could make one layer of torture, she could make two. And if she could make two she, could make a thousand. Endurance was all that was asked of her followers.

She needed no answers, because she was pain and not a person. She was the ice-crackle of water flooding the body, setting all of it to sleep. She was the gentle tap of hands against the body's face. She was the stiffening of limbs as muscles froze and burst.

There was a knock, like a knock on the door of a bedchamber, from somewhere inside of her. Her head twisted and she tried to pull away, back into the separation of pain from body and self from suffering.

The knock came again, and a man said: "Shadowheart, can you follow me out? You've gotten caught inside Wyll's tadpole and I fear Lae'zel is going to attempt something drastic if you don't open your eyes soon. You should be far enough away that the connection is weak and you can free yourself."

Shadowheart. Wyll. Lae'zel. The names were familiar, calling up emotions that could not be reconciled with non-personhood. She wanted to cling to it, keep herself anchored away from being real, but the voice was insistent.

"This is Gale, Shadowheart. I would feel very much relieved if you would respond in some way, since none of us have tried using the tadpoles to communicate before and I'm not sure if

any of this is reaching you. Just don't mention to Lae'zel that I've resorted to ghaik magics to get your attention, since she might murder us both, alright? We can pretend it was all her doing. Shadowheart?"

She pulled her senses inwards and found herself balanced between two threads. The icy water lay beneath her, more hazy now that she wasn't focusing on it. Gale's voice led the other way. She followed it up, up until the ice became fragile and distant and dreamlike. She broke the surface and opened her eyes.

Lae'zel was winding up to slap her again. Shadowheart's hand darted out to catch her. "That is enough," she said. Her face was already hot and stinging in a way that would probably mean a bruise later.

"Finally! You succumb too easily to t'rac, you *k'chakhi*. I thought you would die and save us the trouble of your presence," Lae'zel said spitefully.

Shadowheart rolled onto her stomach, resisting the urge to cough out gallons of entirely psychosomatic water. She had fallen within ten paces of Wyll's torture and awoken twice that distance, so she must have been moved. "The tadpoles?" she asked.

"Feedback from Karlach touching Wyll, we think," Gale said. "They're all still trapped in it, whatever that she-devil is doing to Wyll."

She accepted Gale's hand up, squeezing back against his warm palm. They were near the fire and it was warm and that pain had not been a test or a punishment from Shar. It was the creation of the blue-skinned cambion who still lingered in their camp, kneeling on the ground with Wyll's charred body draped across her lap. Her hands stroked over the remains of his bare skin, blackened and weeping beneath the remaining fragments of his clothes. He shuddered under her attentions, blind with swelling. Lost to wherever she had cast his mind or soul down into. The vampire lay discarded on the ground beside him, its back scorched through and keening into the dirt. Karlach had fallen beside them, her body wreathed in flame from her engine.

"Wyll won't survive this," Shadowheart said. She did not remember much of the convent, her memories were not necessary for this mission. But she knew she had seen burns of the like, and that even powerful healing magic had not been enough to save the afflicted.

"The devil said that he would, so I assume she will guarantee it," Gale said, voice low. He glanced over there, then ducked away again. "Unless she changed her mind."

"Can we drive her off?" Shadowheart asked. "I know you said we could not hurt her without risking Wyll's soul, but surely—surely there is something we can do."

"What do we threaten her with, if she knows we cannot hurt her?" Lae'zel said. "We must wait. When she is gone we can give Wyll mercy."

"Again, you *cannot* kill Wyll!" Gale hissed. "If he dies his soul goes to the Hells, Lae'zel. Dying is not an option."

She made an angry hissing noise and threw up her hands. “It is not an option, it is inevitable. I have seen Gith burned by draa’zvir who looked like that. They do not recover! They shrivel and die in agony, useless burdens on those around them.”

“We will not let him die,” Shadowheart said. She didn’t know how they would manage it, but Wyll was theirs, and she was not ready to let him go yet. It was not his time, they still needed him to fulfill their missions and—Shar would understand, that his help was needed to serve her purposes. It wasn’t blasphemy to be practical in her service. “Can we rouse Karlach? She knows the most of devils, and she knew this one by name.”

“She’s too hot to touch and too heavy to carry by magehand. I think our best bet is to reach out through the tadpoles and try to shake her loose.”

“We will do no such thing!”

“I’m not saying we use them recreationally, this is an emergency,” Gale said.

“We are on a mission of life and death, there are urgent needs around every corner. If we use the worms once, we will never stop. It is heresy to consider using them willingly.”

“Then call me a heretic and excommunicate me from Githyanki church, I think that this situation—“

“Enough, both of you,” Shadowheart said. “Your ceaseless arguing gets us nowhere. I have a plan to rouse her. Gale, can your magehand carry a spoon?”

She was following Wyll into the Hells, and she wanted to turn back. It was cowardly of her, to have doomed him to this and not be willing to follow him, but she desperately wanted to untangle herself and skip back to the safety of her own body. Down they went, all the same.

The fires of Avernus had burned again and she’d lost herself in the remembering. Not her memories of the fire, which had been a moment of pain in a long lineup, but the recovery afterwards. If her subordinates had been a little slower she would have been lost to Zariel entirely, melted away and lost to whatever afterlife awaited a soldier who would kill for a devil. Instead, she’d been helpless and useless for several long weeks, kept like a pet at Zariel’s side. Infernal healing could have sent her back to the front in days, but Zariel had loved the excuse to keep her close. Short the implantation of her engine, it had been the worst weeks of her life.

Wyll burned too, and nobody pulled him free from the lava, but he didn’t melt into so much human soup like he should have. In Minauros the rancid waters broke them down into soft and bloated flesh, but they were still whole for the fall into the next level. Mizora didn’t have the clout to send someone into Stygia, let alone drop them through every level of hell. You needed paperwork for that. A bloody lot of paperwork. But some part of Wyll was falling anyway, or it felt like he was, and it didn’t matter if it was real because it hurt all the same.

They fell through the bottom of the Stygian depths and into the decaying flesh of Malboge, where the bones of conquering monstrosities formed the architecture and the eternally decaying slime of their bodies formed the ground surface. The smell was enough to make you hurl, but what was worse was the pit below them, dark ichor thrashing with movement of things below its surface. A line of souls stood queued at the edge, pain demons shoveling them into the froth one by one. Birthing pits, Glasya's copy of the pits of Avernus where lemures were formed.

People didn't think Karlach was smart, didn't think she listened, but she did. And when people told her anything about the other levels of the hell she remembered, because she had been willing to make her escape by any means necessary, even if she had to go down before she went up.

Wyll fell and she was tangled in with Wyll and they both flinched away from the dark surface. It didn't help. The pool swallowed them up and the seething maggots swarmed. It hurt and that the hurt honestly mattered less than how gross it was, writhing bodies tunneling through their skin, seeking out soft flesh and consuming them. Wyll clamped his hand over his good eye, but they ate through the meat of his hand, squirming between half-eaten fingers to seek out the delicacy hidden beneath.

He screamed, and she screamed with him, and she wrapped herself around him all the tighter as if she could shield him from this somehow. There was nothing she could do.

They broke through the bottom side of the pit, plummeting towards the rubble and ruin of Maladomini, strewn with trash and seeping ooze. At least the maggots were gone. Wyll's hand was still held over his eye and he was weeping, the frantic breathless sobs of a person who knew there would be no escaping their suffering. She'd heard the damned cry like that, waiting on the edges of the pits of Avernus. She'd heard lemures attempt it, wracked with agony at the whims of the imps and fiends who commanded them. She didn't think Wyll was even conscious anymore, not of anything except the pain.

She wished she had a physical form, not just a consciousness tangled up in his. She would pull him to her shoulder and wrap her arms around him, absorb the impact when they hit the ground, when it shattered and they broke through to the tunnels underneath.

They seemed so incredibly alone now, falling faster through the black shafts of the labyrinth beneath the surface. Besides the pit in Malboge, she hadn't seen any devils in their fall, but she hadn't felt so terribly alone until just now in the darkness.

"I'm still here Wyll," she said. She didn't know if he could hear her, wherever he was, but she needed to say something. "I'm still here and I'm not leaving you."

Wyll sobbed.

She opened her mouth to try again and there was a spoonful of soup in her mouth.

It was rich, like liquid velvet on her tongue, salty and full of flavor and it was the best thing she had ever tasted. She was so startled by it that she lost hold of Wyll and found herself awake again.

There was a spectral hand in front of her, holding a spoon. Her hands hurt like a motherfucker. That didn't matter, though, because Mizora was sitting right fucking next to her, caressing Wyll's mutilated body and crooning at him.

Karlach rolled to her feet and snarled. "Let him *go*."

Mizora's eyes flicked over towards her, and she smiled indulgently. Because she wouldn't be a devil if she didn't always act like she knew better than you, knew you better than you knew yourself. "Oh, Karlach, you know I missed hearing your little threats." She petted her hands over Wyll's weeping scalp. There wasn't anything left of his ear anymore, and not much of his nose. Karlach wanted to puke. Mizora continued: "I thought you were going to stay with my pup and keep him company? You promised it so sweetly, too."

"You absolute cunt." Karlach was losing her cool, she knew it. She wanted to rip Mizora's head off. She couldn't do that because—she wasn't supposed to do that—but if she got her hands on those damned horns she was going to do it. Mizora was sitting there and slurping up Wyll's pain like a fucking leech. Karlach grabbed her axe from where it had fallen and took a step towards Mizora. Her hands were stiff agony around the handle. Didn't matter.

"Woah, woah, Karlach, don't!" Gale yelled. "Sorry if the soup was a bad idea, but killing Mizora isn't going to help Wyll!"

"I left him there alone!" Karlach roared, and it all fell away, all those neat tidy rules and thoughts. Her engine screamed and her mind quieted and there was a thing that needed killing right in front of her.

She swung the axe.

It bounced, gold sparks spitting where the blade hit a barrier and couldn't break through. Fucking sorcerers. Fucking devil magic. She swung again, the rage in her bones telling her that if she hit hard enough it would work. There was screaming everywhere; like there should be on a battlefield. If only her target would scream too.

Instead, the blue-skinned woman looked her in the eyes and said: "But he's not alone, sweetling. He's got his pet vampire to keep him company."

The pain had stopped. It was good. That was good. It was good.

He had been falling and that was bad, falling always ended in mangled splintered agony. But for once the ending wasn't half as bad as the fall itself. It had been—he had been—*it hurt*.

But now it was over, and he was alone. Being alone meant no one was there to hurt you, so it was good. The wind whistled, and the world stretched out on and on. There was nothing but endless red rock, smooth and featureless. If he lay very still, perhaps he could stay here forever, without anyone noticing him ever again.

There was something wrong in his chest. There was an emptiness there, something hollow and hungry and cold inside of him. He was missing something and now that he noticed it, he couldn't stop. There was something missing inside of him and She'd already taken his eye and He'd already taken his heart and he couldn't—he couldn't lose anything else.

The emptiness stretched and the wind whistled and suddenly it crashed over him, like a wave against the foundation of Wyrm's rock. Isolation was no longer safety but loneliness, beating itself against him. Nothing changed. Everything around him looked the same. The wind whistled overhead, but didn't touch his skin. He couldn't feel his back against the rock, couldn't feel anything at all. He was alone, and there was nothing left of him.

Like a child, he wished someone would come rescue him. He pictured his father. Dismissed it, for he had no father. It was a fantasy. His father was long dead, or else he'd forgotten him and was better off for it. Soon his Master would come and the pain would begin again and that would be—it would be worse. Wouldn't it? But he couldn't bear to be abandoned like this.

Soft footsteps approached him, and a body knelt by his side. Arms, smooth and cold, pulled him into an embrace. It was so good to be held, gently and without pain. The pain would begin momentarily, but you learned to savor the moments where it was absent. They could be worn smooth in nighttime reverie, polished like treasures. His eyes—his eye—opened, and She was there.

He didn't know this woman. Her skin was blue-grey, but the rouge across her cheeks was a incongruous baby-pink. She'd contoured so much it seemed like her whole face had been painted on. Deep shadows were smeared around eyes that were black, with lit with gold in the center. Her eyes were cruel. Of course they were, Mizora never had to pretend to be anything but cruel with him. He'd known that from the start.

"Did you miss me, pup?" she asked.

And he didn't, he didn't, he wished he could never see her again but. If he said that she might leave him here, alone in this half-world that ate at his soul. But he couldn't lie to her either, because Mizora always knew when he lied, always knew what he was thinking.

His traitor body pushed closer to her and she laughed, voice high and irritating like the patriar duchesses who would attend—who attended the balls where he would—no, that wasn't right. Mizora laughed, and her voice was as it always was, her arms were as they always were and her lascivious whispers were as they always were. And he hated it but he couldn't make himself pull away.

"You never can admit how much you need me, but that's alright. I don't need you to say anything. I know," she said. "I know this was hard, but it was necessary. You suffer so sweetly and you owed me. And I enjoyed this very, very much."

Mizora's hands followed the bare skin of his chest up to his neck, then up further to rest upon his brow. "There's just one more thing we have to do before you can go back to your new playmates. They're oh-so-frantic to have you back, they must enjoy you nearly as much as I

do. But I can't have you forgetting the fun we've had today. So I'm going to give you something to remember it by."

Hands dug into his skull, sinking through flesh and bone and he arched in her hands, frantic to escape. He begged her to please, to have mercy, that he hadn't intended to—he did not remember what infraction he'd committed to be here again with hands digging into his brain but he would do better. He would do anything, if it would only stop, if she would stop drawing molten steel out of his skull. The pain reverberated, echoed, arcing outwards from his head like his nerves had been flayed and let to dangle outside of him.

He didn't realize she'd released him until he felt her tongue on his face, licking at the tears that flowed down his cheeks. "So sweet, my pup. Always so sweet," she crooned. "Maybe just a little longer before you go back. I want to enjoy your new face, before you see your reflection and get all sulky about it. But I think, for that, we'll want a little privacy. Your leech can go."

There was an unthreading. Things that had seemed very confusing only a moment ago became less so, and more so, and less real. Astarion felt someone reach out for him, a desperate hand try to pull him back. But when he opened his eyes it was gone.

The devil was gone too. His back was on fire, a pain so intense it wanted to pull him back into reverie. Karlach had collapsed next to the burnt body of a tiefling and she was crying over her axe. Everyone else was yelling frantically. The tiefling looked familiar, but surely he would remember if there had been another one of them in the party.

Whatever. He would worry about it later. The pain was pulling him back downwards, and he needed to find some smooth-worn fantasy to cling to before reverie carried him into remembrance of the nightmare he'd just escaped. The tiefling was a problem for future-him.

Chapter End Notes

DnD hell lore is awful. dreadful. you can tell why they stopped at Dis in that narration because it's very hard to conceptualize the torments of being in a swamp or being in a featureless plane in a nice, pithy, action oriented way. I would also like to submit a complaint that there are *two* firey hells and *two* icy hells. just popping this boy into the deep frier and then the freezer and then back in the deep fryer and back in the freezer...I am not trying to write slapstick here, but the hells are *deeply goofy*

Anyway! That sure was something! Surely everyone will be totally fine and chill and Wyll will just bounce back up and start snarking any minute now 👀

Chapter 6: Karlach

Chapter Notes

> and we're back! it feels like it's been forever since I wrote this chapter (it has been) but I am finally far enough into chapter 8 to feel like I can compromise my "keep a 2 chapter buffer" principles and share this with y'all. Sorry for the delay, I irritated my wrist/elbow somehow and ended up taking a week off typing outside of work in hopes of it going back to normal. Which worked, so we're back!
>
> A little lull, wherein everyone scrambles to keep Wyll alive and I make healing potions less effective for angst reasons. Astarion sidles up a little closer to this big tiefling who seems so willing to stick her neck out for him.
>
> This was supposed to be a gale chapter but after writing 2000 words of gale logicking his way through the most efficient forms of wound care I realized that Karlach was the most emotionally resonate narrator for this chapter too. Sorry Gale. you'll get your chance someday.

Reason returned to her when her axe hit dirt, like a knife to the gut. Coming back from a frenzy was a lot like a gut wound—the way there was something *wrong* with you, poison mixing with your blood. The sudden finality of it, as the anger bled out and left you empty and cold. She'd tried to kill Mizora, and the only thing that had saved Wyll from her betrayal was the devil's magic.

Her knees followed the axe to the dirt. Mizora was gone. That must be why the shield had vanished. Wyll was still there, she hadn't taken him away.

But Wyll wasn't human anymore. Horns had burst from his brow, twisted through years of growth to curl around his head, the flesh at their base pulped and oozing. Not a tiefling's horns—proper horns, like a fiend would have. Karlach's breath caught on a sob. Beneath the swelling and the oozing flesh she couldn't tell what else had changed—was he taller now? Were those ridges along his cheeks? His eyelid was swollen shut and she could only hope there was actually an eye still beneath it, devilish or not.

Mizora couldn't just magic someone into being a devil. That wasn't how things *worked*. Souls went into the pits and the maggots ate them and they come out lemures. Lemures get promoted into devils. This had to be some kind of trick, some kind of mind game. Wyll had been in there, before she'd been torn away. He'd been hurt, half-mad with it, but he'd still been Wyll. She had to believe he was still Wyll.

It began to rain, a rush of cool water sheeting down on them, sizzling against her flesh. She looked up and found Gale standing above her, blue magic rising up from a rune circle drawn

at his feet. Spilling up into the air above them, swirling, condensing, falling again. She held out her hands, cracked and blistered, and the cool water beat back some of the throbbing pain.

“Are you with us, Karlach?” Lae’zel asked, going to one knee beside her. She had a blanket bundled under one arm.

“Yes,” she said. “Gods. I’m sorry. I don’t mean to do that, I hoped it was—I hoped it was something the Hells were doing to me, not something that’d stick.”

“A warrior’s rage. Some soldiers are carried by passion, like the dragons they ride,” Lae’zel said. “It can be a valuable weapon.”

“I could have fucking killed him,” Karlach said. She gulped a breath, trying not to start crying again. There wasn’t time for crying. If there was a way to save Wyll, that had to be their focus. “Now I have to be grateful that Mizora’s magic stopped me from doing it. That fucking bitch.”

“I would gut her myself, if it would help Wyll,” Lae’zel said. “But guilt must wait. We will need your help.”

“Right.” She swallowed. “What do I do?”

“I will lift Wyll’s shoulders. Pull the blanket beneath him,” Lae’zel ordered. “The wizard’s water spell will stop the burns from continuing to cook his flesh, but we must keep the wounds clean to prevent infection.”

Wyll inhaled when Lae’zel’s hands touched his shoulders, but he didn’t try to escape her except to whine at the pain of it. They moved as quickly as they could, lifting him by inches and sliding the blanket beneath him. Lae’zel pointed out that Mizora had restored some of Wyll’s melted flesh before she planeshifted. That Wyll had a nose again, and both ears. That he had fingers, and not just stubs of charcoal and bone. That Mizora likely intended Wyll to survive, else there would have been no point in using restoration magic.

“He may yet die,” Lae’zel said, when they finished. “We were not prepared for an attack at night. The cleric exhausted herself and cannot cast healing magic. The wizard knows none. Our supply of potions will be insufficient. The wizard and I will return to the Druid grove for aid. From my training, I cannot say if he will survive till our return.”

“Wyll is strong,” Karlach said.

“So are many people who die.”

Shadowheart said: “If you’re not going to help, just go. We all know you’ve already given up.” She knelt down at Wyll’s head, three healing potions clutched in her hands. Only three.

Lae’zel rolled her eyes. “And let amateurs who thought ice on fresh burns should be our first plan of attack handle him? I have not given up, cleric. I hope he lives. I simply acknowledge that odds are against him. Do not!” Her hand shot out to catch Shadowheart’s as the cleric attempted to pour the healing potion over Wyll’s chest.

“What now?” Shadowheart hissed.

“By mouth only. His clothes have burnt and stuck to his flesh, the fragments will have to be picked from his skin so it does not heal over them and fester. Let the potion address what deeper wounds it can.”

Karlach shuddered at the thought, and even Shadowheart didn’t argue. But it was hard to feed a healing potion to someone barely conscious. Lae’zel had to prop his shoulders up, and Shadowheart fed it to him in small sips, worried he would choke. There was nothing Karlach could do to help without burning him further, so she crawled around the other side to check on Astarion.

Wyll had fallen onto his back at an angle, and the burn stretched from his left hip to just below his right shoulder. The flesh revealed in the aftermath was cooked like meat, his gambeson and fine cream shirt charred and stuck to the burn along the edges. By all rights, the fire that seared him should have caught his clothes and burned the rest of him, but it hadn’t. Hellfire was strange like that sometimes. Sticky. It stayed where you put it.

Gale’s water ritual had caught him under its spray, so hopefully that was helping. It had washed most of the blood off his face, the earth beneath them turning to mud and running over his hands as they lay limp against the ground. He was unconscious, she hoped, but his face was still tight with pain. His cheeks were still sunken with hunger, and it wasn’t fucking fair that something awful had happened to him again, just when she was trying to make things right. “Can one of you help me with Astarion?” she asked.

“We have only three healing potions,” Lae’zel said. “You cannot suggest giving one to the vampire.”

“*Astarion*. And no—I know, we can’t risk Wyll dying. I meant, can one of you help me get him onto a blanket? I don’t want to burn him.”

“We shouldn’t leave it near Wyll when he’s defenseless like this,” Shadowheart said. “Maybe Gale could restrain it again—”

“No,” Gale said. He must have finished the magic ritual, the drone of the incantations had been hard to hear over the thrum of rain. He stepped into the stream of it; hand held up over his brow in a half-hearted attempt to keep dry. They were all going to be soaked through after this. “I’m not going to do that, Shadowheart. You saw, same as I did. He was barely strong enough to lift his head *before* he was burned, how’s he going to bite Wyll? Karlach will stay here and keep them both safe, like we agreed.”

“If it was desperate—”

“He was desperate before,” Karlach said. “I know you’re scared of him, Shadowheart. Wish you wouldn’t let it make you mean like this.”

“You are all being *delusional!*” Shadowheart hissed. “So it’s suffered. So it’s suffering. Everyone suffers, that’s how life works! It doesn’t make it less dangerous, or less our enemy.”

“Restraining him when he’s defenseless and knows we know he’s terrified of us would make him *more* our enemy, though,” Gale said. “Besides. My magic isn’t limitless either. I need some to keep Lae’zel and I safe on our trip to the Emerald Grove and back. So the answer is no. Karlach can watch them.” Gale shook out one of the blankets they’d had Astarion propped up on, then paused to consider the maneuver.

“I can keep us safe without need of magic,” Lae’zel said, walking over to Astarion’s side. “But I agree. We will deal with the vampire once he awakes. We do not have time to squabble over plans already decided.” She took Astarion by the shoulders, and nodded for Gale to take his legs. They lifted him up and onto the blanket. Astarion almost roused at that, snapped weakly at Lae’zel’s arm. She pulled back out of reach and he whined, but made no attempt to follow her, laying boneless against the rough wool of the blanket. “Not a threat,” Lae’zel concluded.

They’d done all they could for Wyll and all they were willing to do for Astarion, so it was time for them all to squelch and drip across camp for their dinner of overcooked stew before Lae’zel and Gale headed off to the Grove.

It was the best thing she’d eaten in years, and one of the most bleak meals she’d had in a long time, even counting the Hells. Everyone was miserable, and miserable company weighed on you more when you’d seen them happy a few hours earlier. At least when a devil was miserable you knew they probably deserved it.

Speaking of:

“Did Mizora really turn Wyll into a devil?” Shadowheart asked. “I mean, the horns…he doesn’t look like a tiefling. No tail, for one.”

“Why would she make herself a more powerful enemy?” Lae’zel argued. “And he doesn’t have wings.”

Gale said, “Not all devils have wings, so I don’t think that tells us anything. I guess we’ll just have to hope he’s still Wyll when he wakes up.”

“He was,” Karlach said. “Down towards the end there, he was still Wyll.” And then she had to explain what she’d felt in the lower levels, that Wyll had been aware of the rest of them breaking free of the tadpole connection, his horror as they abandoned him. It really raised the mood. She confessed that she had no better idea than the rest of them how deep his infernal transformation went. “I mean, Mizora is Zariel’s lawyer. She’s not a big shot on her own. I didn’t think she has the authority to send a guy on a field trip through the Hells either, so who fucking knows?”

“Once he’s recovered, I can use magic to detect evil and see if I pick up infernal traces on him,” Shadowheart said. “But that might not tell us the truth either. If she’s only gifted him a portion of infernal blood, he might still read as a fiend.”

“So ultimately, we’ll only know if Mizora comes back and says what she did,” Gale said.

“And only then if you manage to cast detect thoughts before she says it,” Shadowheart sighed. “I hate this.”

“Oh, come on, the stew’s not that bad,” Karlach teased. Nobody thought her joke was funny, though Gale did take it seriously enough to protest on the stew’s behalf.

They subsided back into silence. Lae’zel ate like she had pit fiends lurking over her shoulder, then got up to butcher the deer Wyll had caught for Astarion. Karlach finished next and got up to help her. People kept scolding her for doing things with her hands, like she hadn’t noticed they were burned. Yeah, she could have sat under the rain cloud with Wyll and Astarion, but her hands hurt a lot less than being useless did.

“What do we tell the druids?” Gale asked, suddenly. “We’re arriving at night, the gates will be closed. There needs to be an emergency to excuse our presence.”

“But they’re not likely to be more enthusiastic about helping a warlock than they are about the tieflings,” Shadowheart said. “And I fear the tieflings might be similarly hostile if they realize what Wyll is. Someone who willingly allied with the monsters that got them exiled from their homes? I don’t think we can risk bringing a healer or any of the tieflings back to camp, not until Wyll is able to defend himself.”

“We can defend him,” Karlach said. “We will defend him.”

Lae’zel said, “They know Karlach fled the hells and that we allied with her. We will tell them a devil was angered by our alliance and attacked him. They do not need further details.”

They considered that. Lae’zel laid out the cut meat in thick slabs, stripping out bones as she went. “Finish your meal or put it on ice, wizard. We should boil the bones into something Wyll can drink later, we’ll need the cookpot for that.”

Lae’zel gave directions for Shadowheart and Karlach to finish up preparing the meat. A hole dug beside the fire, lined with stones and covered with coals. The meat wrapped in its pelt and then packed in damp leaves and branches; buried to cook overnight. The offal Shadowheart incinerated with a few firebolts. Gale used prestidigitation to clean out the cookpot from the stew and they refilled it with fresh water. Karlach made the mistake of asking Gale to explain why cantrips could be used even when the spellcaster needed to rest before they could use other magic.

“Many scholars have devoted a great deal of time to that question,” Gale said. “The current consensus is that strong magic causes the spellcaster to channel the weave in ways that build up inside the brain. Sleep is the natural remedy for the clutter and damage of daily living and it seems to wash away the damage caused by spellcasting as well. Cantrips are formulated to be channeled less intimately, and they don’t cause the same sort of intense reaction. But if you used the same cantrip a hundred times, you might begin to feel that same way as overuse of regular spells. It’s a bit like a migraine, really. You always know when you should stop, because the world starts swimming…of course, that in turn has caused theories that migraine sufferers are actually natural magic users that haven’t noticed—”

“Wizard. Enough.” Lae’zel steered him away from Karlach. “Use one of your cantrips to summon light, so we may see the way as we walk. Flirt with Karlach later.”

They left camp in a twinkle of magelight and a rush of protests that Gale would never misuse scholarly curiosity in such a way. Camp felt even quieter and bleaker with them gone. Shadowheart and Karlach stared at each other from across camp. Karlach just didn’t have a good read on the little cleric. She was a good fighter, strong-willed and practical. She seemed loyal to Wyll. She was the most stubborn of the lot about Astarion, but if she hadn’t ceded to Karlach’s demands to heal him earlier in the night, Wyll might be stable now. “I don’t know how cantrips work,” Shadowheart said. “So don’t ask. Let’s get Wyll turned over.”

There was no good way to lay Wyll; he was burned everywhere. But they filled a bucket with cold water and used a cantrip to freeze it to slush; Karlach held her hands in there till she couldn’t bear it anymore and Shadowheart said they were cool to touch. Then they rolled Wyll over so his back was facing the stream of water. Shadowheart knelt and prayed over Wyll’s body: for strength, for resistance, for her god’s blessing. Karlach wasn’t sure what else; her prayers were all real quiet and mumbling.

Karlach left her to it and finished Lae’zel’s proscribed chores. The shovel handle was agony against her palms. She felt like she probably deserved it. She wasn’t usually the self-flagellating sort, but she’d never been in a situation like this before. What were you supposed to do with yourself when someone saved your life and got immolated for it? When someone offered her even the smallest favor in the Hells it was a prelude to some sort of scheme, usually them getting close to Zariel or fucking with Zariel using her as a patsy. She wasn’t used to things being freely given. Especially not when the cost was this high. People didn’t *do* that. Maybe Wyll wasn’t right in the head. You had to be messed up to sign on as a warlock, right? They didn’t take the well-adjusted.

That didn’t make her feel better.

Shadowheart came back and helped her gather green wood for the roast. When Karlach tried to take up the shovel again, Shadowheart stole it. She made Karlach wash her hands off, complaining about the broken blisters, and banished her to sit by Wyll and Astarion while she finished the work. Though she was still calling Astarion “the vampire.”

After Shadowheart finished, they turned Wyll back over. Like a hog on a spit you had to rotate so it cooked evenly; except the opposite of that. Shadowheart set her bedroll up in the light of the fire, rather than under her makeshift tent. After a long while of tossing and turning, she even seemed to fall asleep.

Karlach waited. Shadowheart didn’t move. She was pretty far away, really, since they’d had Astarion outside of camp for fear of him manipulating their tadpoles. After a bit, Karlach decided to risk that she was really asleep and crept back into camp. She collected the wooden mug she’d been given for the stew, and the knife from Wyll’s pack that she’d been using to help Lae’zel with butchering. She undid the buckles on her left bracer and set the knife to it. The blood that dripped into the mug steamed, but it looked like normal blood. When she dipped her fingernail in and tasted it, it tasted like blood. Gross. It was worth a try. She let the blood drip till the cut started to clot, then returned to the rain.

One hand over the top of the mug kept the water out. A bandage swiped from the stack, dipped inside, let her brush fresh blood across Astarion's lips.

His tongue darted out, tasted. One red eye slitted open, then the other. They seemed to glow in the low light, reflecting the distant fire like a cat's. He licked his lips clean, then licked them again, compulsively. He rasped: "What did I say about not offering things you can't give me, darling?"

"It's my blood, I can give it to whoever I want," Karlach said, tried to keep her voice down so Shadowheart wouldn't wake. "I'm going to get you a healing potion later, I swear. It's just we only had a few, and Wyll's in a bad way."

"He's alive?" The surprise seemed to startle Astarion fully awake.

"Still breathing," Karlach said. Then she looked at Wyll, watched his chest move for a moment to make sure it was still true. She'd been watching him breathe earlier, just letting the rise and fall of his chest tell her that they hadn't lost him yet. Wyll shivered slightly under the stream of cool water.

When she looked back, Astarion was staring at Wyll too, with a face that she didn't know how to interpret. Incredulous? He looked almost angry. Of course, Astarion had good reason to be afraid of Wyll. If someone had treated her like that, however good their reasons, she might have been happy to see them burn. "Do you think he's going to stay that way?" Astarion asked. Then, to clarify, "Breathing, I mean."

"That's why the rest of them have gone. They're getting supplies, help."

"Humans are just so fragile," Astarion breathed. Even though he could see the horns on Wyll's head as well as she could.

"He's going to be fine," she said. If she kept saying it, she'd believe it. "So what do you think, Astarion? Nobody here awake except the two of us, nobody has to know. You thirsty?"

He craned his head up, chin resting on the blanket. "I had never been so full in my life, you know. A deer! But it does seem to burn off quickly, when you're on fire. I could manage a nightcap, I think. Just a taste." He smiled at her, all teeth. And, oh, that's what she'd been missing when he was nothing but bones and hunger earlier. Even in what had to be some of the worst pain of his life, half flayed by hellfire, there was an edge to his tongue now.

Or maybe it wasn't that he was less hungry. Maybe it was that she'd told him that everyone who'd hurt him was away or asleep or semi-comatose. Either way, she liked the thought that this funnier, irreverent version of Astarion still existed, not just the cringing and terrified skeleton he'd been when they took the gag out. She'd like to find a way to keep him around.

She considered logistics for a moment. Astarion might be able to lift himself a bit, but not without bending his back. That would hurt. On the other hand, drinking from a cup while laid flat on his stomach seemed tricky. "How…I could soak the cloth in the blood and you could suck it out," she suggested.

“Ugh. You sound like Dalyria,” Astarion said. “Let’s not. Just pour slowly.” He opened his mouth, let his tongue loll out over his bottom lip. She poured out a little blood on his tongue, and he swallowed it a flutter of lashes. They repeated the procedure, Astarion making those little noises that made her want to rub her thighs together, till the cup was too empty to pour. At which point his hands grabbed for the cup and he used one long finger to wipe it clean, sucking her blood off his fingers in single-minded intensity. She thought he might be blushing. She was lucky she’d never shown a flush and it would have been too dark to see regardless.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re delicious?” Astarion asked. “Karlach, was it? Karlach. A fine spiced cider, your blood is. Best I’ve ever had.”

“I’m sure you tell all the girls that, you charmer,” Karlach said.

“I don’t usually make conversation with my dinners, actually.”

Right. Because Astarion was, for all that she wanted very much to like him and her hormones wanted very much to jump him, a predator. And he usually killed his dinners dead. Wyll had been right, in a way. It was easy to forget that Astarion was dangerous when you were talking to him. The conversation died for a minute there, dead like everyone who’d ever ended up Astarion’s dinner.

He interrupted with a question. “Are my clothes a lost cause, then?”

There wasn’t much left of it, the frilly shirt Astarion had been wearing or the embroidered gambeson he’d had over top. The front had already been burned through in spots and torn up with cuts, and now the back was burnt clear off. “Well I can see your whole back through the hole, so I think so. You’d be more patch than shirt, if you asked a seamstress to fix that.”

“Ah,” he said. “Do I look like Wyll, then? Overdone steak?”

“Less well done than Wyll,” she said. “I did push him off of you.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “Another gift. Add it to my ledger, darling.”

“I’m not much for maths,” Karlach said, dismissing the joke.

“Do you think it will scar?” he asked.

“Dunno. It would if you were a tiefling,” she said. “Mine did. But I don’t know how vampires work.”

“And our resident *expert* is out of commission,” Astarion said with venom. Then, more quietly: “Usually it takes some creativity to make a scar stick. I just hoped…I suppose it would be hideous.”

Ouch. But she wasn’t sure Astarion had even gotten a good look at her earlier, and it was near full-dark now. Maybe he hadn’t noticed how much of her had been lost to melted burns. Maybe he was a self-centered asshole. It was fine, it wasn’t like the burns mattered much compared to the engine jammed in her chest. She’d never gotten to be hot in the good way,

fallen straight from teenage awkwardness and zits into a horrorshow. “Nobody will see it,” she said, “unless you insist on going shirtless all the time.”

“All the time, for the last three days of our lives? Or did no one mention the timeline on our impending…transformations? I don’t suppose you keep your scars as a mindflayer, anyway.”

“Wonder what would happen to the hardware?” She contemplated the mental image of the engine bursting out of her chest, like a tangle of shipwreck sticking out of the harbor, coated in blood instead of barnacles. Never mind. She was going to not contemplate that. “We’re going to make it. Lots of smart people here, we’re going to figure out a solution.”

Astarion made a noise, sort of like the sound imps made when you stepped on them. Like an indignant deflating balloon.

And: okay. Fair.

“Smart about non-vampire stuff, I mean,” she said. “They have a lot of ideas for sorting out this whole tadpole thing and I, for one, refuse to die. I just got free! It’d be a fucking waste to kick it now.”

Astarion’s hands clenched against the blanket, then released slowly. He didn’t say anything, so maybe she’d permanently ruined the mood and the conversation was over. She wasn’t used to having to watch her big fucking mouth; up until five days ago she could say whatever she wanted to whoever she wanted; as long as they weren’t Zariel they couldn’t do shit to her.

One of the few pleasures in Avernus was verbally curbstomping lesser devils. Physically stomping them was also up there. And soul coins…but none of those things mattered anymore because she was in the real world now. And there were better pleasures to be had, even if her chest felt empty in that pounding, gut-clenching way that only soul coins ever seemed to help. She was getting a clean break. The Karlach of Avernus was done, the Karlach of Faerûn was ready for her second shot. Even if that second chance was paid for by someone else.

She was staring at Wyll again, watching his chest rise and fall. He wasn’t allowed to die. He just wasn’t. And watching him breathe was better than letting her eyes roam over the rest of him, because her eye kept catching on shit she didn’t want to see.

“You knew his devil,” Astarion said, startling her so badly that her engine flared, hissing against the rain. When she looked back, Astarion had laid his cheek back down against the blanket so he could look at Wyll.

“Yeah, I know her. Mizora.”

“She said my devil—well. My sire’s devil. She said he was Mephistopheles. Do you know if they’re…friends? Allies? Do you think she’ll tell him where I am?”

“Not out of the goodness of her heart, that’s for sure,” Karlach said. She considered what she knew about Mephistopheles: basically nothing, except that he was an Archdevil, very good at hellfire, and master of Cania. She didn’t think Zariel had any alliances with him, but Zariel

didn't talk to Karlach about alliances and strategy. Karlach was a point-and-shoot sort of weapon. "She might, if it profits her. But if your sire is doing demon shit with an Archdevil he could have found you anyway using divination magic."

"Oh."

He didn't look upset. Just blank. Like he'd expected her to say something like that and hadn't bothered to hope for anything better. Like he'd fallen into the River Lethe and everything good had just washed away in it. She didn't like it. She also didn't like the idea of whatever kind of asshole vampire that stole people's hearts and bartered them to Archdevils showing up and stealing Astarion back.

She backpedaled. "Unless the tadpoles, like, interfere with that! Which they might. I mean, Mizora should have been able to lead Wyll straight to me, but she let him wander around for days until we happened to run into each other. And even if he could find you, what, is your sire going to come rough it out in the woods? That doesn't sound like a very fancy-pants vampire thing to do. I thought they all hated nature-stuff." And spent most of their time in velvet-lined coffins in pretentious gothic castles, but she wasn't sure if that was real or just the stuff they put in the novels so she wasn't going to embarrass herself further by suggesting that.

"No," Astarion agreed dully. "He'll pay someone else to fetch me back instead. A hunter, or a warlock." He kept staring at Wyll. "You shouldn't blame him for making stupid decisions and getting himself crisped, really. His mind is a mess. Too much being yanked around by his demonic mistress. Too many *compulsions.*"

"Which you know from trying to mind-control him."

"I didn't have to try. It was easy. And then I knew he was a hunter, and a warlock, and if there was anyone *my master* would contract to bring me back—I might—I might have panicked. A trifle. So if you could, darling, whatever else they decide: I'll agree to anything if I don't have to go back to him. Anything you want. Anything at all." His voice kept that River Lethe emptiness that made her want to put someone's head through a wall.

"Nobody is selling you back to your sire," she promised. "I'll make sure of it." She wanted to say Wyll wouldn't have, ever, either, but she'd seen him waver with his hand on his sword, trying to decide whether or not to kill her. He hadn't, and she was fucking grateful for that. But if she'd been a blood-spattered vampire, and Mizora didn't say *where* she was going to take the wayward spawn…she didn't like that what if.

She wasn't sure if Astarion believed her, but she'd made her position clear. If he didn't believe her she'd just have to prove it. They lapsed into another long silence measured by Wyll's shallow breaths. In her head, she tried to trace how long the walk to the Grove was, how long it had been since Lae'zel and Gale had set out. Time passed quietly away from Zariel's army, where demon criers and gongs had tracked every moment of your day, dragged you from rest and to the frontline and back again. It wasn't that she was nostalgic for it, she was so glad to be away from everything about that place. But her mind kept waiting for the screech of a crier.

That was the thing that was seductive about the Hells. You didn't have to think about anything. You could let yourself go through the motions and let your superiors make all the decisions and let them use you and disappear into the roar of violence. Think just one step ahead. Next crier you'd take your boots off, lay down on the ground and pass out. Next crier you'd pay the toll to a fiend for them to purify water for you. Next crier you'd go back under and let the rage take you, hope you surfaced less hungry and that you didn't remember anything about how that happened.

Her promotion to general had been a punishment from Zariel, who'd thought it less fun when Karlach fell too deep into those routines. The title had been a farce—every title was endlessly inflated in the Hells, so even an imp might be commander, so that his commander could be a general and their commander a warlord. She was still given her orders, only left to struggle and figure out how to carry them out, how to keep her cohort from cannibalizing each other. She kept the criers, she just lost most of the shifts she'd spent asleep to an endless slog of meetings and discipline and accounting, the hells devils made for themselves.

It was going to be different. She wouldn't have orders anymore, just allies. She had to push down the instinct to look for a commander amongst them. Lae'zel spoke like she expected to be obeyed, Wyll had a weight to his words. But they weren't her commanders, she didn't have to do what they said.

"How long is that damned wizard's water torture going to keep dripping on us?" Astarion asked.

"I think it goes till he dispels it, it's a ritual spell," she said. The water was nice, pleasantly cool against her skin, like a drumbeat. But when she looked, Astarion was shivering under it, lips paled to grey. "Lae'zel said it was good to cool off the burn as much as possible, so it doesn't get worse," she explained.

"I'm familiar with the concept," Astarion said. He said, in the low rush of a messenger who expects the message will be poorly received, "But I think you're supposed to stop at some point. Dalyria always said a quarter hour was plenty and more than that was delaying the inevitable, because it does hurt so much more when you take it out of the water. Never one to let her pity run away with her. But your monster hunter has stopped shivering, and it's quite cold, and I don't think that's a good sign with humans."

And shit. He was right. You couldn't see Wyll go pale without skin to read, but the shaking had stilled completely. She hadn't been given orders for what to do if that happened. Her vents flared again, reminding her that the rain had stopped sizzling on her skin some time past. That if she felt comfortably cool, Wyll and Astarion must be bloody cold.

She risked lifting Wyll, two layers of sodden wool blankets to keep him safe as she carried him back out of the rain. He moaned with the pain of movement but didn't wake. Shadowheart didn't either, so either Karlach was a lot quieter than she thought or resting all your spell slots back absolutely knocked you out.

Karlach settled Wyll back on the ground and fell back on the faint memory of her dad trying to get her little brother, the one who didn't make it out of childhood, settled on his sickbed. Legs elevated with a blanket to keep more blood in his heart. She couldn't pile blankets on

top of him or set him close to the fire but she could give him something sweet and warm for him to drink, warm him up from the inside. Lae'zel had left her with a bottle of fresh-pressed cider for if Wyll woke, she could warm it against her body, get Wyll to drink from a soaked bandage the way Astarion had sneered at.

She returned to the water spell, appreciating the fresh flush of cool water against her skull, her soaked hair already warm from the short time she'd spent outside.

When she lifted Astarion he made a noise of surprised pleasure, and when she tried to set him down on the ground he protested. "Just a little longer, darling? You're wonderfully warm."

She pointed out that she'd be heating up even more now that she was out of the water spell, that she might burn him. He pointed out the presence of a wet wool blanket between them to buffer the heat, promised that he'd warn her if he was in danger of burning. Somehow she agreed to his foolishness, those damn eyes getting her again. She ended up sitting beside Wyll with a bottle of cider between her thighs and a vampire draped over her lap like a cat, gone all liquid by the heat.

Getting the cider into Wyll without choking him was an ordeal, but after the first few offerings of the soaked bandage he woke up enough to drink from the bottle. She went slowly, and after a bit he started to shiver again in the night air. She guessed that was a victory, though it made him look even more uncomfortable. He mumbled and whined at her, too deep in the pain to wake fully or recognize her. She wished the others would hurry up. Astarion, for his part, slipped into whatever elves did instead of sleep and was peevish when she tried to wake him to shift him off her lap. "It's *warm*," he whined.

"I don't want to burn you," Karlach said, feeling rather outmatched by the trials of playing nursemaid.

"I'm not burning, I'm warm. It's nice," he said, rubbing his face into the wool over her thigh. He seemed almost drunk with it. "I haven't been warm like this since…I can't remember. I can feel my fingers. You're wonderful."

And so he was still on her lap, the blanket between them steaming gently, when Lae'zel and Gale arrived back at camp. Lae'zel raised an eyebrow, but didn't otherwise comment. "We were delayed," she said. "You moved him out of the water. Did he get chilled?"

"I think so," Karlach said. "I've been getting him to drink, a little, like you said. What were you able to get?"

"Their potion-seller lives outside the grove, so she was not available. Their annoying bard has gone missing as well. But we woke the short man and their herbalist, and many tieflings. Most were useless."

Gale sat down and swung the pack over onto his lap. "But we were able to exchange currency and the tiefling's regard for Wyll for many of the things we were seeking. No greater healing potions or elixirs, unfortunately. But several lesser ones, and Arron thought this might help him!" He held up a small frosted glass vial, filled with a golden liquid. "An elixir of fire

resistance. Rather too late, but it should stop the burns from progressing further even if we keep him warm by the fire."

They dispensed out the potions—the best healing they had for Wyll, then two more besides, followed by the fire elixir. Lae'zel insisted on scrubbing off Karlach's hands, muttering under her breath about the open blisters she'd given herself, before applying the healing potion directly to her palms. It itched like bugs crawling over her skin for a full intolerable minute as the magic sank in, but when she rubbed the blistered skin away there was baby-soft new skin beneath. "Thanks," she said, rubbing her hands together more to try and make the lingering sensation go away.

Shadowheart woke in the commotion and wandered over, tried again to use a healing spell to no success. She blinked blearily at them, then looked up at the sky and over at the fire. Stared at Astarion, cuddled up on Karlach's lap. "I'm going back to sleep," she announced. "Be quieter."

Lae'zel sneered something under her breath, but there was little left to talk about. Gale dispensed with the water ritual after they filled the waterskins and buckets, stirred the broth simmering over the fire, and was sent to bed as well to recover his spells for the next day. Karlach was starting to lose steam as well, teetering from anxiety to exhaustion as Lae'zel announced that Wyll would live through the night.

"Will the vampire bite me if I tend to his back?" Lae'zel asked quietly.

"He might if you call him 'the vampire'," Astarion mumbled into Karlach's leg. He still seemed half-asleep, though he'd woken a little when the other's returned.

"May Lae'zel treat your back?" Karlach asked him.

"If she promises not to cut my head off," Astarion said. "Or stab me in the eye. And she's gentle with the clothes. I can repair the back if I open up the sleeves…"

"I will not cut your head off or stab you if you hold still and mind your teeth," Lae'zel promised. "The shirt must be cut off."

Astarion grumbled about that, but didn't protest further. Lae'zel sliced through the back of the neckline of his gambeson and shirt, then around the edges of the burn with a knife to free it from the skin. Astarion held himself incredibly still as she worked the knife, the fear seeping back into his frame. But once Lae'zel set the knife aside and returned with a damp rag and the crudely forged tweezers she'd gotten at the grove he relaxed again, seemingly content to ignore the pain of her washing and then picking over the ruined flesh for embedded fabric. Either the burn had gone so deep over most of his back that he couldn't feel it, or he had some incredible pain tolerance.

He relaxed so much that Karlach found herself getting sleepy again, slumping against the packs Gale had left. She wasn't asleep, she was still aware of the click of Lae'zel's tweezers, the measured rhythm of her breathing. When she finished and poured the healing potion over Astarion's back, she felt him shiver against the itch of it. Then Laezel was back to Wyll's

side, and everyone was safe and there was no crier to tell her the shift was over, that she could sleep. But she sank down into it anyways.

Chapter 7: Shadowheart

Chapter Notes

heading out on a trip this weekend so I'm rushing to get this posted. hopefully I haven't missed any egregious typos XD

Welcome to the "and now we finally talk about all the things" chapter! We also get to see Shadowheart's internal world, where hopefully I have managed to make clear that I love her and also she is such a trainwreck in this story.

p.s. I know that canonically the game shows the szarr family crest as an art deco bat, so just consider this an AU where he goes all in and has the rat king insignia instead. As a little treat for me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was strange, waking up from the light of the sun. Her mornings had always been dark. Hushed, but never quiet—the noise of a whole dormitory of initiates trying to complete their preparations before first prayers. Shar did not tolerate indolence, and neither should her followers. Shadowheart could feel the temptation of it, warm sunlight blanketing her and urging her to stay abed awhile longer, for there would be no one to see if she rose late for prayers. But a goddess did not need an intermediary to know of her failings.

The ache in the back of her head had faded to nigh imperceptible, magic again ready to do service. It took her a moment, mind still sluggish, to remember why that was very important.

Wyll.

She threw the blankets off and bolted to her feet to find him nearer at hand than she'd expected. It took a moment to remember waking in the night and seeing them all gathered by the campfire before she'd stumbled back to her bedroll. Gale was yet asleep, along with the tiefling, Karlach. Lae'zel was seated across the fire with her legs crossed, sitting vigil with Wyll. She had him wrapped up in white bandages like a body shrouded for death. And that was not even the worst of it.

The vampire was curled up beside Karlach, wrapped up in one of their camp blankets, nearly within striking distance of Wyll. Somehow she'd missed that in the night.

Lae'zel rose alongside her, sword in hand. She gestured for Shadowheart to join her on the other side of the fire, imperious as always.

"Why is the vampire unrestrained?" Shadowheart hissed.

“He is asleep,” Lae’zel said. “And I am watching. Do you doubt that I can strike faster, with my sword to hand?”

“The tadpoles—”

“I resisted his prodding before. If he had tried to take one of your minds, I would have followed through on my promises and ended the threat. But again, he is asleep.”

“Trancing. Elves trance,” Shadowheart corrected.

Lae’zel stared at her. “Is there a meaningful distinction?”

She *hated* the Gith. Every word she spoke was crafted, specifically, to try and put Shadowheart in her place, to demonstrate her superiority over mere *istik*. Even her ignorance she used as a weapon. Shadowheart was going to wring her stringy green neck if she didn’t stop goading her.

Logically, she knew that Lae’zel didn’t know about her mission, about the artifact. If she had, their arguments would be long since past and one of them would be dead. It would come to that eventually, she had no doubt. Her only hope was to convince her allies they would be better served to side with her and her Lady. She had been useful to them, more useful than a mere swordarm. She’d been accommodating of their strangeness and their beliefs. She’d done her best to pass invisible amongst the outsiders as she had been taught. But now the vampire threatened another schism in the camp, one where she felt even less sure of her position.

She had seen the man it killed for no purpose but for hunger. She’d felt that hunger in its mind, bottomless agony. She’d felt it in her neck too, like a nightmare come to life. Wolves and their fangs, dripping with saliva, red with blood, had been circling her dreams ever since the crash.

Hard to push away, when there was a predator in their midst.

Wyll had been wrong, clearly, in some of his predictions. The vampire had higher intelligence than its actions had implied—it had suffered at their hands, learned to fear them in turn. This seemed righteous, to turn suffering onto a monster and balance out what it had inflicted on others.

She was no stranger to delivering supplicants into the arms of the Dark Lady. Not everyone knew how to accept pain for the gift that it was. Someone had to help guide them, by spell and blade and bone. But the others were not Sharran, and they would not be accustomed to wielding pain outside of battle. She could see how they shied away from it, like an initiate whose hand you had to hold tight around the hilt of a knife. Maybe she had been that fainthearted once. Memories of her youth were a burden Lady Shar did not force her to carry.

Guilt could not be allowed to outweigh caution, however soft her allies’ hearts. She would not become prey again.

She had thought that, in this if nothing else, Lae'zel would be her ally. The vampire, however much it suffered, was a predator. At Wyll's insistence, they stood between it and the unguarded necks of refugees and travelers. With nowhere else to go, its ravenous hunger must aim at them instead, and now they knew it intelligent enough to hate them for that. If they allowed it to grow stronger, to move freely, eventually it would strike. But Lae'zel had refused to see it bound in the night, and now she allowed it into their camp while everyone else slept. Did the Gith think she could tame a vampire as Gith tamed dragons? Or was this a ploy to drive a wedge between Shadowheart and her allies?

Regardless, she couldn't act now without driving the others away and failing her mission. She let the anger pass through her, seeking the numbness that a Sharran should be able to achieve at a moment's notice. It was harder than it should be, had been ever since the crash. *Or maybe* her traitorous thoughts whispered, *you have always failed at being worthy and Lady Shar had taken away your memories to save you that burden as well.* She ignored the vampire, and gestured instead at Wyll.

"Why is he wrapped like a dead body?"

Lae'zel made disapproving noise, and crouched down beside Wyll again. The wrappings exposed little beside his nose and mouth and closed eye. They were yellowed and stiff around base of his horns, where the open wounds still wept. The horns were obviously monstrous, sweeping back behind his head and so large that she'd needed to prop his head up between them with a rolled blanket. "Do you have no experience treating the injured without magic? The bandages protect the open flesh from infection."

Shadowheart resisted the urge to snarl at her. There had never been need for mundane healing at the cloister. Harm was meted out in balance to the healing that could allow it to continue. She had seen bandages before, just not—not covering a person in such an absurd fashion. They had only planned to wait a single night for her to heal Wyll, surely there was no great risk of him catching ill in that narrow span of time. She gritted her teeth. "Mundane healing is, as you say, not my expertise. What else were you able to do for him?"

Lae'zel spoke quietly, their companions else all still asleep, as she listed with a soldier's efficiency: "He ingested several healing potions last night, mainly lesser draughts. We tried an elixir of fire resistance, that it might prevent further injury from the burns. I removed the rest of his clothes and cleaned the wounds, then applied the primitive salve the Druid healer could provide. It is a mixture of honey, to prevent infection, and herbs to numb the pain." Lae'zel paused. "I do not know what 'honey' is. It tasted sweet and did not poison me."

Shadowheart didn't have the faintest notion if honey had any medicinal effects, but presumably a druid would. "It's made by insects," she said. "Bees. They make it out of the nectar from flowers." She didn't remember ever consuming honey, but she could taste it in the back of her mind, sweet and somehow more enticing than refined sugar, so she must have had it once.

"Do you have sufficient magic to heal him fully?" Lae'zel asked, jarring her from that pleasant sense-memory with further mockery. Shadowheart had slowly been strengthening her magic, stretching herself like a joint frozen after injury, but she had recovered only a small fraction of what Her Lady had once granted her. Her anger must have been obvious,

because Lae'zel did not wait for her answer before continuing: "If we must ration, begin with the face. Then the hands, his feet and his sex—" she sketched out the parts with her hands. "The skin tightens if it scars, reducing flexibility and function. If magic remains, treat the major joints before attempting to heal the rest of him."

The plan was sensible enough to for her to temporarily set aside the condescension. Shadowheart did as she was bid, first kneeling beside Wyll's head to pray for guidance and blessings from Lady Shar. *I still have need of him to complete your mission. This isn't greed or sentiment. I need him to fight for you, to lead us back to your altar.* Then she laid her hands on his brow between the horns and channeled her magic into healing his wounds. *"Te curo."*

"Te curo," she repeated, again and again, until her head was pounding again with the strain of it and no more magic could be forced through the narrow channel of her soul. Hands caught her when her vision darkened for a moment, and she almost fell back into their embrace before she realized it was Lae'zel. "I don't need help," she said, forcing the darkness back with slow breaths. The throbbing pain wouldn't go away until she rested again.

"Do not faint," Lae'zel ordered. Too slowly, she released Shadowheart. She waited a moment, as if Shadowheart was immediately going to succumb without her bony fingers digging into her shoulders. Then she offered Shadowheart a cup, which turned out to have tea in it, sweet tea brewed nearly solid with how strong it was. There was a solid half inch of tea leaves in the bottom of the cup. Shadowheart discovered this when she got a mouthful of them and had to spit them out onto the ground.

"When did we get tea?" Shadowheart asked, rather than be forced to thank Lae'zel.

"Gale insisted," Lae'zel said. "The tieflings who couldn't provide other aid sent food. He haggled for these leaves and lumped sweetener. Gale claims they are a necessity."

Lae'zel took her cup and handed her a waterskin in replacement. Then she went to Wyll's side. His eyes and lips, left uncovered by Lae'zel's enthusiastic wrapping, looked visibly less swollen. Lae'zel set her hand on Wyll's cheek and his eyelids fluttered, not quite opening. He made a noise, confusion and pain in the back of his throat. "Wyll, you are protected," Lae'zel said. "The is'lak is gone. You are with us, and you will fight again."

His lashes fluttered again. There was something dark and red beneath his eyelid. "Lae?" he rasped.

"Do you know what happened?" she asked.

Wyll's eye opened fully. It was changed, the sclera gone black and the iris red like blood. Like a tiefling. Like a fiend. His eye flicked between Lae'zel and Shadowheart. "I..." he shuddered, squeezed his eye shut again, "I'm sorry. Did she hurt anyone?"

"Wyll, she lit you on fire!" Shadowheart said, aghast.

"We are unhurt. The vampire was burned, and Karlach burned her hands separating you. She has fully recovered; the vampire may yet scar," Lae'zel said. She paused, then continued,

“We saw, through the parasites, what your devil did.”

“I’m sorry,” Wyll said again. “I didn’t mean to—I hurt you. That wasn’t yours to bear. My punishment. I’m—I’m sorry.”

“Your mental shields are weak, as we discussed. I will continue your training,” Lae’zel said.

“Why?” Wyll’s voice was still thick with pain, but his confusion made the anger in Shadowheart’s gut twist.

“Wyll, do you think we’re going to abandon you because of that bitch?” she asked. “You do. That’s what you think.”

“I promised you the Blade,” Wyll said weakly, then picking up speed: “I’m sorry. I didn’t want—I didn’t—I can’t expect you to stay when *She* might come back. She never likes it when I try to cling to people, I’m sorry—”

“Wyll, be quiet!” Lae’zel said, grabbing onto his horns. His rambling panic cut off abruptly into gasping breaths, his eye straining upwards towards his horns. “I am neither a coward nor a fool. I will not fall for your devil’s scheming. She will not cleave you from us with this.”

“Wyll, mate,” Karlach said, “Please stop apologizing for being tortured. It’s fucking painful to listen to.” Shadowheart looked over—Karlach was up, the vampire’s eyes were open and staring at them. Even Gale was awake in his bedroll. Apparently Wyll had woken the whole camp in his panic.

“Seconding that,” Gale said, extricating one hand from his bedroll to wave it in the air. “It really does make a person feel uncomfortable, hearing it implied that they’re the sort to abandon an injured companion for the crime of having fallen into bad circumstances. I mean, you did sign her contract, which was obviously a poor decision—”

“Gale!” Karlach snapped.

“—but that was years ago, presumably, and who hasn’t made a life-altering catastrophic decision or two in their youth, really? It’s what we do in the aftermath that matters.”

“We still need you, Wyll,” Shadowheart said. “We are, all of us, in this together until we are cured. What she’s done to you changes nothing.” At least, now that she was sure his mind was truly his own. No fiend would feel guilt for inadvertently sharing the pain of his own torture.

“What *did* she do to me?” Wyll asked hesitantly, still staring up towards the horn Lae’zel was touching. “Am I...”

“We don’t know,” Karlach said. “She did some magic and it changed the way you look. You have horns now and your eye changed color. We haven’t seen the rest, because she also hurt you real badly. But she either made you part-fiend or made you look like one. We don’t know which.”

“Fuck.” Wyll blinked rapidly, tears gathering in the blackened eye. He tried to turn his head away from them and the tip of his horn caught on the ground. He gasped.

“The horns will be sensitive,” Karlach said. “When I was a kid and my horns were growing, just ‘bout anything touching them would set me off. Especially if you bump them into something. Maybe don’t hold on so tightly, soldier,” she said to Lae’zel.

Lae’zel let go. Dropped her hand to her lap, tightened it into a fist. “Shadowheart attempted to heal your wounds. We could remove the bandages from your face, see if she was successful.”

Wyll kept blinking at her, tears darkening the bandages beneath his eye.

“Perhaps the man needs a moment,” the vampire drawled, “to process being turned into one of the monsters he hunts.”

The others, who lacked the vigilance to keep watch on the predator in their midst, all turned towards the vampire in surprise. It quailed under their gaze, as if it had spoken without expecting to be noticed.

“Astarion! You’re awake,” Karlach said brightly.

“It is difficult to trance when your captors are holding court above your head,” the vampire replied, licking its lips again. A sign that overwhelming hunger hadn’t been sated by the gory spectacle of it feeding the night before, no doubt. “I apologize for interrupting the conversation of *thinking creatures*. If we could all simply ignore that slip. I can control my tongue. I’ll be quiet.”

“Okay, well, we’re doing this first, I guess,” Karlach said. She sat up and stretched with a ripple of muscles that was clearly intended to remind everyone how strong she was and how readily she could enforce her opinions on the vampire situation. She was one of the most beautiful women Shadowheart had ever seen, and the power in her movements was entrancing. If only she could marshal that power for the Dark Lady, instead of being forced to square up against it. Karlach reached over and dragged her battle axe towards her, setting it on the ground in front of her folded legs. She looked at them. “So Astarion’s a person, right? I know you all have shit going on, but if we can’t at least agree on that, me and him are just going to have to leave together. I don’t want to do that. I think we’ve all got a better chance of finding a cure together. We can negotiate on other shit, but not that.”

“I think we all realized last night that we’d made some mistakes in the way we handled this situation,” Gale said. “I, for one, apologize for my part in it. He may be a morally-challenged person, but he’s not a beast.”

“It is a predator,” Shadowheart insisted.

“Yes,” Lae’zel agreed. “But so is a draa, and that makes them no less intelligent. He was not turned by the Ghaik cult that has entranced the weak-willed, despite the parasite, and he speaks the tongue of sentient creatures. We lose nothing by acknowledging the obvious.”

“Are all spawn like you?” Wyll asked.

The vampire stared at him, licked his lips again. Glanced back at Karlach behind him, who nodded at him. “I haven’t the faintest idea. My master’s other spawn seem mostly sentient, except perhaps for Petras. But it’s not as if I’ve had the opportunity to *mingle*.”

“Do you believe that vampire spawn are inherently superior to all mortal creatures?” Wyll asked, in the tone of a man repeating something from a book.

“Why would they be?” the vampire asked. “I suspect that’s the sort of self-consoling thing a spawn might say, once they realize how thoroughly they’ve been trapped by this existence. Delusional, but the delusions do make life more bearable.”

“A spawn that was freed from their master might enjoy rather more advantages,” Gale said.

“Not in my experience,” the vampire said snidely.

“You aren’t like the other spawn I’ve fought,” Wyll said. “They were powerful. Ravenous. Evil.”

The vampire wiggled deeper into his blanket shelter. “I don’t know what you expect me to tell you. I haven’t met any other spawn, besides my siblings. I thought the powers you spoke of were made up. I’ve never thought of what would happen after—if our master died and we were freed. The imagination can only stretch so far.”

“But are you always hungry?” Wyll asked. “Is that true, that a vampire’s hunger can never be sated?”

“I don’t know,” the vampire said. “I would very much like to find out! I haven’t yet gotten a sip uninterrupted by mortal injuries since I was dumped here.”

“You want us to believe you’ve never glutted yourself on blood. That you just *happened* to fall on the first unguarded victim you saw, but you’d never succumbed to temptation before?” Shadowheart sneered. Absurd. Its lies were transparent attempts at sympathy.

“Why would our master allow us the blood of thinking creatures, when we could grovel at his feet for vermin? I have had rats. He thinks himself the comedian, you see, and there are rats on his family crest. Mice, occasionally, if I could catch them. Street cats and pigeons and insects, the whole breadth of vermin available in Baldur’s Gate. But you can limp along with a rat every ten-day. After a few years you can even hold conversation like that. A spawn cannot starve, of course, so it’s merely a question of how corpse-like you want them.” The vampire’s jaw clicked shut, and he looked around their camp frantically. “But it *hurts*. I can be good, anything you want, if you’ll let me have—”

“Astarion.” Karlach said. “I’m not letting them starve you. I told you that.” She glared at them, daring anyone to contradict her.

The vampire subsided, panting as if it needed to breathe, as if it was winded just from talking. It was still weak, still a liar.

But why would it pretend to be such a poor liar some of the time and then let slip methods they could hurt it like a penitent on the rack? Surely there must be some greater plan, some scheme, besides its grasping attempts to capture their pity.

“Rats,” Wyll repeated. “On the family crest. Are you saying your sire is Cazador Szarr? I thought the rumors about his family had all been disproven. A man was arrested and hung for slander when I was but a child for claiming otherwise.”

“You can buy the truth,” the vampire said. “And then make the law dance for you. *Karlach* promised you wouldn’t sell me back to him.”

“Karlach has promised you many things on our behalf,” Lae’zel said.

“Of course we’re not giving you back to Szarr!” Gale tossed his blankets back and the vampire flinched. Gale, not noticing, wandered over to the fire and began to fuss with their supplies. “Our objection is to the killing and eating of innocents. If we hold you accountable for that crime, we can hardly then do favors for a vampire lord who’s done far more of the same. Would anyone else like a cup of tea before we continue this rousing debate? I cannot go further without the elixir of life. Perhaps breakfast? The refugees sent us back with a lovely quiche that I thought would do wonderfully for breakfast. There’s still the venison roast to unearth, but I assume we’ll wait till we’ve settled things with Astarion.”

It was absurd to break the conversation off midway through, but everyone else seemed eager to delay the inevitable awhile longer. Wyll was too nauseous to eat, but Lae’zel insisted he needed to drink some of the bone broth they’d simmered overnight to keep him from growing faint. Karlach and Gale helped unwrap the vampire from its blanket cocoon, but the burn across its back was still raised and blistered and they couldn’t find a way to have it sit up without pressing on the burns. It whinged and whined, claiming the itching was intolerable and batting its eyelashes like a wounded creature.

Lae’zel had cut its shirt off in order to tend to the burn. Beneath, it was skeletal, each rib distinct and its collarbones like knives. The vampire looked down on its bony fingers with distaste and complained that even the deer hadn’t been enough to restore him to his normal self and that they lacked the self-control and moderation in killing him that his sadistic vampire lord possessed. It then complained about being cold until Karlach agreed to return its blanket after warming it against her chest.

While Shadowheart was distracted watching that pageantry, Lae’zel apparently received Wyll’s blessing to unwrap the bandages on his face and neck. The skin was shockingly pale pink beneath the bandages and speckled with little dots like freckles. More importantly, there were ridges of keratin along his cheekbone and neck, obviously infernal. Lae’zel delivered the news, then unwrapped one of his hands to show him the change in his skin. She had to hold the hand up to his face, because he was too weak to lift his arms from his side, but when she did Wyll breathed out a sigh of relief.

“That’s normal,” Wyll said. “Happened when I was a kid and I scraped the skin off my arms and thigh falling off a shed roof. It takes longer for the color to come back to the skin than for the wound to close over; it’ll fill out from those dots and go back to its normal color. It took a few months when I was a kid, because my father didn’t want to pay a healer to speed up the

cosmetic part of the healing. I was supposed to be learning a lesson about making good decisions. But this is a good sign, right? A fiend's skin wouldn't heal the same way as a human's."

Nobody knew, but they agreed it seemed like a good sign, because Wyll seemed so hopeful about it. Shadowheart had questions about what kind of man had the money to pay for magical healers for his son but would let him deal with months of disfigured skin to prove a point. It was the sort of thing she expected from Sharrans, who could use that pain for their devotion, and not the doting secular parent she had been constructing out of Wyll's stories.

After, Shadowheart took the opportunity to pull Gale and Lae'zel away from the group. "If we must decide everything by council, we need to agree upon our goals," she told them. "Karlach has clearly made up her mind on the vampire and will suffer no disagreement. If we allow her to walk away with it, we will have it back in our camp extracting revenge after her soft heart and carelessness gets her killed."

"Harsh," Gale said. "I mean, are we sure Astarion is out for revenge?"

"What creature of intellect wouldn't be?" Lae'zel asked. "I agree, we must keep Astarion within our sight in order to assure our safety. He may yet become an ally, if we handle this right. Clearly he expected hostility from mortals and has no other allies to turn to. If we treat fairly with him, self-interest may turn him away from revenge."

"I think you overly optimistic in the capacity of monsters to go against their base instincts," Shadowheart said.

Gale shrugged. "Does it make a difference? If we agree that Astarion poses a potential danger to us, then we need to keep him close. We don't want to lose Karlach from the party and we will if we treat him poorly. Our only options are to somehow change Karlach's mind, let her go, fight her for custody of Astarion, or bargain with Astarion in a way that satisfies her."

"What if Karlach is enchanted or charmed? We should test that before giving up on our safety," Shadowheart argued.

"Again, I do not know detect thoughts. We could use the tadpoles—"

"Unacceptable."

"—but I think it's better to accept how vanishingly unlikely that would be? Karlach feels connected to Astarion because Wyll treated *her* like a monster and she's made a parallel to the way we treated Astarion. She hasn't seen him do anything threatening, because he hasn't done anything threatening since she arrived. And he hasn't done anything threatening because Karlach is offering him a better way to get what he wants than killing us all. And I, for one, am I grateful for that," Gale said, waving his arms emphatically. "We're going to be down at least two people today, with Wyll hurt and someone needing to stay in camp to protect him. We don't have time to leave someone perennially at camp on prison guard duty. If Astarion attacks us later, you'll be proven right and Karlach will be proven wrong and we'll fight him to the death, again. But I am sick of it."

He hadn't done anything because he couldn't do anything. Because he couldn't move. "He tried to bite Lae'zel," she protested.

"Sometimes pain drives patients to madness," Lae'zel said. "He was no threat. We made a bargain last night and he honored it."

Outnumbered, Shadowheart gave up on finding allies anywhere in their camp. She would have to wait for the vampire's inevitable betrayal to be proven right.

"Also, you should stop calling him 'it', Shadowheart," Gale said. "We've agreed he's a person, that means he deserves the respect of using his name."

"The tiefling is going to hit you if you don't stop," Lae'zel said dryly. "Her shoulders flare every time you say that."

Shadowheart abandoned their council before she hit Lae'zel in turn. Her head was still pounding, and she reminded herself that she needed these people, even if they were insufferable. It would be so much simpler if one of them would take control and give orders to the rest; she had no experience dealing with diplomacy. But then again, she was unlikely to be chosen as leader if such a thing were to come to pass. She touched her hand to the pouch where the artifact rested and searched again for numbness.

She got back a few steps ahead of the other two. Karlach was sitting between their two invalids. Shadowheart crossed her arms and stared down the vampire. It looked back at her, head pillowed on his folded arms like an indolent lounging beside the pool of a bathhouse. "We are agreed that Astarion is a person, and that we do not trust him to wander these hills alone without attacking more innocents. So what, exactly, does he want?"

Astarion glanced sideways at Karlach, then looked at Shadowheart again. "I would like to walk freely in the sunlight during my last days before our bodies get ripped apart and we turn into slimy tentacled monsters."

"No. Ask for something else."

"Then I would want to walk *unfreely* in the sunlight, and join you on your horrible misadventures, in my last days before we are turned into slimy tentacled monsters," Astarion said. "And I don't want to be starved, pinned down, incinerated, locked in a chest, murdered, given to insane druids, dropped in the ocean or lobotomized, if that's not too much to ask." He bared his fangs at her in a clear threat.

"You think we would trust you to stand at our backs while we're being attacked?" Shadowheart asked, incredulous.

"I assume there would be magical restraints involved somehow," Astarion said. "Gale seems quite the innovator within the field. I would be unarmed, of course. Perhaps you'd have my fangs pulled out? I am even willing to offer to be *useful*, if that's what it takes. I have spent the last two hundred years walking the same streets of Baldur's Gate in the dark and being tortured in the same dungeon and I would like to see more of the world than a beach and this wretched campsite before we all go insane."

“Star, nobody is going to pull your *teeth* out, that’s deranged,” Karlach protested.

“How, exactly, could you be useful to us?” Lae’zel asked. “You can’t walk.”

“I could before you *cut my head off*,” Astarion said. “I’ll heal. I’ll need blood to do it, but I’ll heal. The services I can provide while supine are limited to sexual favors, but I’d be a much better lay once I regrow some thigh muscles so I can move. Unless you’re into necrophilia.”

“That is disgusting,” Lae’zel said, echoing Shadowheart’s thoughts.

“Astarion, nobody here is going to force themselves on you, I swear it,” Wyll said.

“I’ll gut ‘em if they try,” Karlach snarled.

“I do think that having sex with someone who is, technically, our captive, is ethically suspect,” Gale said, “Perhaps you could be helpful in literally any other way?”

Astarion stared at them. “That’s your line? Beheading is fine, sex is beyond the pale?”

Karlach said, “Yeah. I don’t hang out with people who rape people, so we’re going to put the murder behind us and not do any other evil shit.”

Astarion glanced between them. “Not to argue semantics, but if I was *offering*, it wouldn’t be rape. And it is bizarre to have my captors and seven-times murderers jump to defend *my* virtue. But if you’re not interested...I think you’re in need of a locks and traps expert? Based on your thrilling tales of continual near-death on your adventures thus far. I’m an expert in neither, but I can hardly be worse than you lot. And if a trap blows up in my face, I’ll be considerably less dead than any of you.”

“That would be useful,” Lae’zel conceded. There were collective nods and shrugs around the party.

Astarion shook his head. “Again, I do not understand the logic by which offering to suck someone’s cock is absurd, but offering to be *blown up* is acceptable. The worms are eating your brains.”

“We’re all risking death,” Karlach said. “Nobody else is paying their way with sex, which is why we’re not asking you to either.”

“Nobody else is bargaining for their conditional, with caveats, freedom either. If you were, you might be willing to offer up considerably more,” Astarion protested.

Karlach looked at him, and said, real quiet: “Yeah, I would. But I don’t want to ally with the kind of folks who’d say yes to that.”

“So, uh, pending caveats and me apparently thinking of a way to prevent him from stabbing us in the back or running off into the woods, are we agreed that Astarion will be joining us on our investigations in exchange for not trying to kill us anymore?” Gale asked.

“A mutual truce on attempted murder,” Astarion said, smiling sweetly. “And also blood. I want at least one rat or larger mammal, per day, or the opportunity to hunt for myself once I’m on my feet. Plus whatever it takes to get me back on my feet today and if I get blown up in the future. And I want a new gambeson, since Wyll ruined mine.”

“Are you a lawyer, now?” Karlach asked, grinning. Astarion didn’t reply, just looked expectantly at Wyll like he was somehow the one in charge.

“I’m fine with those conditions,” Wyll said.

“Agreed,” Lae’zel said.

“If it makes you all feel better, but I’m not throwing Astarion in danger if there’s a better option. We’re not using him as some sort of meat shield,” Karlach said.

“Not forcing anyone into danger, except insofar as we are all agreeing to go do possibly suicidal things collectively,” Gale agreed.

“Then we’re all agreed...Shadowheart?” Wyll asked.

Everyone stared at her. She gritted her teeth. “Fine. If we can think of a way to stop him from stabbing us in the back or ripping our throats out, then fine. On all your heads be it.”

The decision was anticlimactic. There was too much to do around camp for anyone to go anywhere right away. Wyll was already flagging, and had to be moved to his tent to protect his healing skin from the sun. Lae’zel had spent the full night on watch and went to sleep in her tent. Gale and Karlach left camp to attempt to catch something for Astarion.

Shadowheart was left to watch the vampire by herself. She put her foot down at Karlach’s suggestion that Astarion be left to doze in the shade of Wyll’s tent.

He would stay where she could see him, if he needed shade he could ask her to cover him with a second blanket. His tadpole apparently was preventing him from immolating in the sun, a bit of sunburn would serve him right for attempting to kill her.

Gale had tended to the dishes with a quick prestidigitation before he left, so she was left with very little to do besides rest and hope her headache lessened somewhat. They hoped to go scouting in the second half of the day, cover as much ground as possible while investigating their twin aims—the goblin camp where the head druid was hopefully still held captive, and the gith creche that supposedly held their salvation. Gale and Lae’zel would be going; they debated whether Shadowheart or Karlach should be left to guard Wyll.

Karlach had protested the idea of leaving Shadowheart in camp on the notion that she didn’t trust *Astarion* would be safe from *Shadowheart*. The vampire had simpered. Astarion had promised to scream for Lae’zel’s help if Shadowheart broke her word.

And she couldn’t even protest that her word could be trusted, because she was half-certain the vampire knew she was Sharran and would throw that in her face if she tried. While they’d

all been busy with the actual work of finding a healer and fighting for their lives, he'd had nothing to do but lay there and watch them. He'd known Wyll was a warlock before the rest of them, and he'd been willing to toss that into conversation when it suited him. She wasn't going to give him ammunition to throw her to the wolves as well.

She tended the fire, still going under the simmering pot of broth. She ladled another cup for Wyll, and helped him drink it, between sips of water. He was in agony from the itching, he confessed, and she applied more of the druid's numbing salve to his hands and face. It was strange. She had so much sense memory for hurting people, for guiding them to Shar, but none for helping wrap their hands to stop them from scratching at healing burns. She apologized for having no more magic to offer him and he dismissed it with a shake of his head. When she laid him back down, the makeshift pillow had to be carefully positioned between his horns. He looked so strange and vulnerable without his hair, even aside the rest of it.

"Shadowheart, do you think," Wyll started, then stopped. "Lae'zel said she applied the salve to all of my burns before she bandaged them?"

"That is what she said."

Wyll flushed, the color in his cheeks garishly visible against the new skin. "I do not know how to say this. I'm sure she was a consummate professional. But I cannot get the image out of my head of Lae'zel applying honey to—" his breath caught and he started laughing. Eventually he managed to get out: "She put honey on my dick, didn't she?"

Shadowheart snorted, then tried to hold her laughter in by plugging her noise and a horrible shrieking noise escaped her. "Oh Lady, she must have."

"Of all the things. The first time anyone—I have been *glazed*—oh gods."

Wyll tapered off laughing but Shadowheart couldn't stop thinking of Lae'zel's *face*, the immense seriousness she must have put to the task of coating every inch of Wyll in honey and she kicked him back off again. By the time they calmed down, he was quite out of breath. "We will never speak of this again," he promised. "I do not want to know what she thought of it. I fell in a frozen lake once while hunting a cockatrice and ended up so out of my mind with the cold that I took all my clothes off and had to be wrestled into blankets by some helpful villagers. I didn't think I was ever going to top that moment for humiliating nudity."

"If it makes you feel better, between the charring and the swelling it was difficult to make out any details. Only Lae'zel would have gotten an eyeful."

Wyll shuddered. "That does not make me feel better, but thank you for trying."

When she left him to try and rest, the vampire was staring at her again. Her attempts to have him moved back to the outskirts of camp where she would be out of range of tadpole interference had been outvoted, because the others had decided caution was for fools and the vampire had protested that he would be cold if he wasn't allowed to lay next to the fire, given that he'd lost his shirt and gambeson. Shadowheart pointed out that, as undead, he had no body heat and would be cold regardless of his clothing. This was somehow marshaled further

support for him to stay lounging by the fire. In any case, Karlach had argued, he didn't need to compel anyone to do anything right now because she and Gale were bringing him back breakfast.

And now he was staring at her.

"What?" Shadowheart said. She refused to exile herself to the other side of camp and let the vampire stay by the fire, so she sat herself down on her bedroll. Her mace, still strapped across her back, dug into her hip when she sat.

"You two were laughing like hyenas in there," Astarion said.

"If you're looking for more gossip to use against me, know that I'm not going to just *give* it to you."

"I was making conversation, you horrible little nun," Astarion hissed.

"You haven't even tried to apologize for attempting to murder me."

"And you, notably, haven't apologized for anything either," Astarion said. "Such as when you refused to heal me out of spite. I suppose healing doesn't come naturally to a cleric of your disposition."

She ignored the comment, the confirmation that he *knew* he was Sharran. As long as he didn't know about the artifact, she could weather him revealing her faith to the others. "I don't need to apologize for attempting to defend myself," she said.

"Likewise," Astarion said. "But since we are both alive right now, and it would be difficult to change that without causing an upset amongst the rest of them...I want to bargain with you."

"And what do you want, vampire? Another chance to bleed me dry?" She sneered.

"I *want* you to stop attempting to sabotage me. Whatever the others suggest as means to keep me 'safe' in the wilds, it's not going to be good enough for you. And then they'll argue and squabble and delay and I will turn into a fucking mindflayer before anyone can decide on anything!" he hissed. He took a deep breath. "I know it's difficult for you to understand, because you've voluntarily sworn your whole life to an evil goddess of torture and suffering, but some people very much would like to *stop* suffering. They might even want freedom. And in the absence of freedom, they might want to have whatever's the next best thing. I'm not doing this for some nefarious vampire plot. What would the plot even be?"

Obviously: "Kill us all and then escape."

"To what end? Do you think I would stage some suicidal assault on this mysterious Druid grove? Perhaps I would attempt to off myself by attempting single combat against cultists, or find this Githyanki settlement and let them lobotomize me, as Lae'zel so charmingly suggested? Or maybe I could just sit in the woods and sulk and wait for one of the abovementioned, heavily armed groups of lunatics to stumble across me and cut my head off. That's the trouble with being a vampire, darling. *Everyone* wants you dead. Right now, only

some of this group wants me dead. Mostly you. So tell me what condition would satisfy your bloody-minded spite and I will agree to it," he concluded.

"I'm not being spiteful," she protested. "You are a predator, and you may have fooled the rest of them, but you won't fool me. Right now we might be useful to you, but we're no more than prey to you in the end."

He rolled his eyes at her. "Bloody-minded paranoia, then. What would it take to satisfy you?"

It was strange, how he seemed to think that Shadowheart's disapproval would make any difference to the others going ahead on some harebrained scheme. But if he were offering...she would push, and show how transparent his schemes were.

"As a cleric I can turn back the undead, with my Lady's blessing," she said. "They feel a shadow of her power and condemnation when I evoke her sigil and flee before it."

"If I had the ability to force irritating clerics to flee before me by divine might I would be much less anxious about their murderous tendencies," Astarion said. "Is that not enough for you?"

"You say the tadpole has allowed you to walk in the sun, to stand in running water unharmed. It may protect you from all magic that should harm the undead," Shadowheart pointed out.

"So test it now," he said flippantly.

She raised an eyebrow. "You can't walk."

"Which will save you the trouble of fetching me back after I am struck down with madness by your goddess and fall into a ravine attempting to flee from her," Astarion said, as if this was a reasonable suggestion.

"And when you call for help and Lae'zel wakes up?"

He shrugged. "Do the undead usually scream? In my experience it's more of a silent, spine crushing terror. I assume you have more experience on the subject than me," he said, digging his claws into the fact that she *didn't* know. She remembered knowing how to turn undead, she remembered the motion of her wrist and the prayer to evoke Shar's sanction, knew them in her bones like they'd been drilled into her. But memories of using it would not come. Many clerics, even Sharrans, would leave the cloister and attend to the works of their Goddess in the outside world. She couldn't remember—

"Just keep your mouth closed," she said. She rolled her wrists, ran through the evocation in her head once. Astarion watched her, the flippant ease finally dropping from his shoulders as his hands twisted into the bedroll beneath him.

He was not immune to the channeled censure of divinity, as it turned out. He twisted and struggled like a caught fish, trying to force his body away from her without any strength in his arms or legs. But, as he predicted, or perhaps remembered, it was a silent terror. She

hadn't thought to ask how *long* the effects lasted, and found herself relieved when the spasms passed after only a minute.

Astarion grimaced. "Ugh. Awful as ever, appears there's no protection there. So see, you're perfectly safe and I'm deader than ever." He shook his hands out, and began inspecting them to see whether he'd hurt himself in his attempts to flee. "You best straighten these blankets or someone will think we've been getting up to something kinky on the bedrolls. Apparently everyone would disapprove of that."

"You are revolting," she said. "It's good to know that I can turn you away if you are senseless enough to charge us head-on. But in my experience, it seems you prefer your prey sleeping, or injured. I can hardly pray in my sleep."

"You are relentless and exhausting," he said. He glared at her and then said. "Fine. If you're that worried about my fucking fangs then we'll pull them out. Will that make you happy?"

Well, yes. It would make her feel vastly safer if she could disarm the vampire of the built-in weapons it had already used to attempt to kill her. But she wasn't fool enough to believe he would let her. She told him that.

"It would hardly be the first time," he said. "They grow back. Not *quickly*, but they grow back."

"You'll tell the others—"

"That we reached a mutually satisfying agreement on the matter. Though I suppose you'll have to decide if you're more worried about me deciding to bite you out of pique or Karlach being very unhappy with you."

He was lying. He would back out the moment she got close to him, or he'd use the opportunity of her hands near his mouth to tear into her flesh or—

The wolf from her dreams closed its jaws around her throat and squeezed.

There was, as she had expected, a great deal of screaming when Karlach and Gale got back to camp. But Astarion surprised her, again, by repeating their agreement exactly as they'd made it, self-satisfied with himself and even more satisfied with the boar they'd managed to bring down and haul to camp alive. It was then, as he waved away their concerns about collective decision-making and lisped at Karlach about the remarkably pain-free dentistry offered by clerics, that she realized her mistake.

It had been a ploy after all. She'd helped him to seem harmless, to seem trustworthy, to seem honest. After all, what sort of monster would let itself be defanged?

Somehow, despite the fact that she'd watched them burn to ash, the teeth around her throat wouldn't let go.

Chapter End Notes

two fic recs to send you off with this week! My original inspiration for the No Teef bit came from PurpleCatGhost's Declaw, Defang. Except in this story Astarion is much more blasé about such things, having already lost his teeth several times (and operating from the principle that nothing is worse than getting killed in an undying loop).

also!! Raayide's Bitten By the Frost went up last week and if you like the concept of resurrected through infernal magic astarion, you should absolutely check it out. Gorgeous prose and real heart-stopping whump.

I swear eventually we will reach a chapter where something happens. I have one outlined right now. Multiple events! People might even leave camp!

Chapter 8: Wyll

Chapter Notes

hello again! it's been a minute. I got very ambitious with my draft of chapter 9, which has thus become chapters 9/10 after being split down the middle. Magically restoring my 2 chapter buffer! Anyways, much love to everyone who's commented - I'm going to finish replies to last chapter tonight, but I wanted to give folks an extra hour or two to read before the ao3 outage tonight/tomorrow morning.

In this chapter, Wyll Ravengard gets to feel miserable.

PS: I will be allowing these characters to do things the game would obviously not allow and won't necessarily force them to face the consequences of doing stuff out of order. It's more fun for me that way :) In about 9000 words you'll know what I'm talking about here.

P.S.S. I apologize for implying teef angst and then eliding it due to the POV characters. I actually have started a fang-extraction one-shot which I someday hope to share if I can figure out how to write Cazador dialogue without it sounding stupid.

The trouble with having pacted to a devil was that you couldn’t wish for death.

No matter how bad things were, Wyll had always known there was no escaping Mizora. He had been at the brink too many times to count—starvation and sickness, blood loss and infection, head wounds and poison.

The first months had been his worst; no supplies but those he could pay for by pawning the clothes he'd been wearing the day of his banishment, no skills in the wilderness, no direction except towards despair. Mizora had been his constant companion that year, crooning to him about how much better life would be when he was dead and hers in every way, reunited in the Hells. He still didn’t know if she had been trying to spur him forward towards survival or trying to convince him to kill himself. Whichever it was, he had her to thank for surviving that year. Without the constant reminders it would have been easy to simply lie down and accept what had seemed inevitable.

He had survived, and he had learned, and he had bartered with Mizora to be allowed the things he needed to survive—to stay in one place long enough to take work, to trade, to rest when his injuries were too great to be cured by potions. She granted those mercies at her whim, and he knew never to test her beneficence. He didn’t speak of the pact, or gather information about her. He didn’t try to court friendship, to step beyond courtesies when he spoke to others. A few times older adventurers had tried to insert themselves into his life as mentors, thinking him some lost child in need of instruction. After the first time, he had run

rather than see them turned against him by her manipulations. It was easier to make excuses to the villagers and farmers and merchants he met on the road—the Blade had others he needed to save, which must carry him on the road away.

He had survived, and he'd found himself constructing the contours of a life. He would live on the fringes of towns, in the spaces between. He would have no allies, but the people he saved might remember him, maybe the traders in town would notice his absence. There were bard songs about him, dreadful ones, but still…when it ended he would be remembered. Not as Wyll Ravengard, but as the better man he wished he could have been. He would fight his monsters when Mizora let him; the else he would fight hers. She set him against challenges increasingly impossible so that he always hovered on the precipice of failure. Like a game: she set the board and he could complete her mission or die. She won either way, but as long as he wasn't dead he could still be the Blade, so he took grim satisfaction from each mission survived.

He had survived, and he had killed for her a hundred times, and now he didn't know whether he'd taken the path of lesser evil when he had turned away from her whispers of life as a kept pet in the hells.

Perhaps she hadn't been lying. Perhaps she would have kept him for herself as her plaything instead of using him for evils. Or perhaps he would have been forced to fight in the Blood War but been killed within days. Devoured by a demon and capable of no more harm in the universe. Perhaps he could have found some way to cheat the pact—some total obliteration of the soul.

The pact had limited the targets she could set him against. He had never fooled himself that she wouldn't twist the pact as far as she could, but those limits had seemed so solid until now.

The damned included any other warlock she chose to set him against, and he had fought and killed several warlocks in her name. Warlocks empowering rivals of hers, doing evil with their magic. But he admitted now, in the dim light of his tent, that he didn't know that was true. Perhaps they were her own warlocks. Perhaps they had been trying to escape their pacts, and he had prevented them from doing so. Even the devils—he knew they must have committed some evil to end up devils, and he'd seen no evidence of softer sentiment from the ones he'd fought. But why would they bare their hearts for a warlock sent to kill them? Perhaps the Hells were full of only the evil and wretched because anyone who tried to escape, who tried to take another path, was killed by someone like him.

He had known she could twist the pact, had decided those targets were allowable as long as they fell within its strictures. He'd thought he could balance those targets with his own as the Blade. True monsters, hurting innocents, where he didn't have to stumble through shades of grey.

And now he'd seen Karlach for the truth of her, and known he was almost willing to sacrifice her for that fantasy.

The fantasy that monsters like Astarion were evil and deserving neither pity nor redemption.

Monsters like him.

He couldn't wish for death, not without increasing the collateral damage of his existence, but he wished Shadowheart hadn't tried so hard to heal him that morning. Agonizing pain made it hard to think about one's terrible decisions, in a way maddening itching simply didn't. And he was better at enduring pain, in any case. He'd only accepted Mizora's offer to take away all of his senses to avoid feeling the pain of an injury once—a joke on her part where she left him blind and deaf in his camp in the wilderness, wondering if a monster was going to find him and eat him while he lay incapacitated—since then, he'd learned to endure what pain he couldn't treat himself. The itching was harder to ignore, like something crawling under his skin, nerves screeching that if he would just scratch they would settle down and the agony would be over. And it was everywhere. There was no part of his body that he could focus on to escape. Because Mizora had lit him on fire and burned away all of his skin.

Astarion had been right, the itching was worse than the initial burn. Wyll had asked Shadowheart to wrap his hands so he couldn't tear himself open scratching, but he didn't think that would be enough. Maybe one of them would be kind enough to hit him very hard on the head so he could be unconscious. Maybe he could beg of them a bottle of wine. It was hard enough to sleep normally, he didn't think there was any chance of it with his mind spiraling and his skin crawling. A sleeping potion would be a gift he couldn't ask, too expensive to waste on him when he didn't even understand why he was allowed to stay in their camp.

He had reached out for Karlach when Mizora hooked his soul, he had abused their connection through the tadpole to *torture* them all. He didn't understand how anyone could forgive that. What use they thought he'd be to them now, how he could possibly be worth wasting a full day of their limited time before ceremorphosis and all their healing supplies.

They knew he was a warlock. Even when Mizora didn't interfere, he hated when others realized he was a warlock—there was always that moment of realization, where they thought they understood everything there was to know about Wyll. That he was a fool who'd, in his hubris, assumed he'd be the exception to every story ever told and taken a bargain for his own gain. Even before Mizora showed up, that was usually the end of it. They thought him arrogant, and a fool, and dangerous—and at least in the last of these, they were right. Nobody could be safe standing at his side, not when Mizora wanted him alone.

These people had responded no worse than he'd expected when he'd confessed to the pact, though it was hard not to chafe under their judgment. If they only knew *why*. Which was, of course, why she would never let him tell anyone.

But Mizora had made clear exactly how little he was worth. That he wasn't a powerful warlock allied with an infernal power. That he was a puppet, backed into a bargain exclusively for her entertainment. Who would want to stay, knowing that?

The horrors all crowded his brain, tearing him to pieces between them like a pack of gnolls. He was devil-touched. They had all seen her hands on her. He had told them Astarion was an animal and let them torture him by repeatedly burning his flesh and soul for kindling. He had almost killed Karlach. He'd broken his pact and Mizora had broken him, and he was going to flay himself, the itching was unendurable. He deserved it, he deserved worse.

There was a ruckus outside the tent that finally pulled him from his thoughts. A hog squealing, raised voices. Presumably Karlach and Gale returning from their adventures hunting.

There were a few minutes of chatter that Wyll couldn't understand, and then Karlach bellowed, perfectly audible: "You little bitch! You pulled out his teeth!"

Which—that could only be in reference to Astarion, right? Had he been so absorbed in his solipsistic despair that he'd missed Shadowheart going insane and deciding to torture their captive? He tried to roll onto his side, get himself up to his feet to mediate the argument, and jarred one of the damn horns against the ground again. The pain was like a thunderclap, spreading out from the place above his eye where the horn was anchored, blinding in its intensity. Balduran's bones, he hated those fucking horns.

When the pain receded enough to hear again, the argument seemed to have settled down. He couldn't catch the words, but there were no screams or clashing steel. He could hear Astarion talking, voice smooth and lilting, sounding not at all upset.

He'd been shocked how different Astarion sounded in the morning from the ragged mess he'd been the night before. Genial, but with a biting wit. Charming, but in a roguish sort of way. There was a pride there, prickly underneath his fear of them, and it intrigued Wyll more than he had any right to be intrigued. It seemed unbelievable, that someone could still remain so much a person after two hundred years of torment. Wyll hadn't even been with Mizora a decade and he already felt himself faded to a shadow of his younger self.

He had felt Astarion, there in the deepest part of the hells, before Mizora arrived to enjoy her handiwork. He hadn't been conscious of him until Mizora cast him out, but in retrospect he could feel the way they'd fit together. He shouldn't think of it, he should respect the privacy of the man if he could offer him no other honor. But he had always been alone, and it meant —there was something indescribable in having felt his horror and terror mirrored back to him in some other person. It was horrifying, what Astarion had experienced.

But he couldn't help feeling *seen*. Not in the voyeuristic way Mizora liked, where she draped herself over Wyll and showed the world how she owned him. In a different way, a way he hadn't realized he'd been needing. It was awful of him, and he shouldn't think on it further.

He wished, desperately, that they could have met Astarion under different circumstances. He could have landed on the beach somewhere further away, been bloodless and gleaming in the morning sun when they met. They could have allied as equals, learned his secrets later. They could have become…perhaps friends was too much to imagine, but allies.

He was getting too far ahead of himself. He *knew* with the bone-deep surety what he'd felt in the hells was real, that Astarion was a victim of years of abuse and torture, that he had been molded into what he was through terror. He knew Astarion claimed to have none of the malevolence against the living that Wyll's books had taught him was innate for vampires, only a pragmatic desire to see himself fed in a world that wanted creatures like him to not exist. But that didn't mean Astarion was a good person, only that he was a *person*. Which meant he had as much capacity to choose his own path as Wyll—more, perhaps, now that he was free of his sire. Wyll would never be free of Mizora.

It was the trouble in his chain of logic. He had killed monsters who attacked people, who targeted villages and travelers. Ones who ate people.

Perhaps the vampire spawn he had fought before could have been different, could have been convinced to give up their bloody rampages if they'd not been caught between the tortures of their sire, the hatred of mortals and their ravenous hunger. But could he have done anything to change that? Certainly not once they had their hands around his neck and were trying to rip his throat out. The goblins who terrorized the Elturel refugees surely had become raiders not out of some innate evil within goblins. There were social factors at play, history that led them to be outcasts, which led them to crime, which led to more hatred, spiraling ever downward. But he couldn't give them land, or an honest living, or a blood price for the scores of relatives had been killed in centuries past of raiding parties and goblins killed because they were *presumed* to be raiders.

What could one man do in the face of all that? He couldn't stand aside and let innocents be killed, no matter how unfair the world was to shape some people into monsters and others into innocents.

It was almost a relief that he wouldn't have long to grapple over these problems. His days as the Blade were coming to an end regardless, unless Lae'zel's people really did hold a miracle, and they somehow managed to remove the parasites before their transformation. He wondered if ceremorphosis would mean the destruction of his soul and that he might escape the pact after all. It didn't seem likely—if it was, Mizora would have pulled him down to Avernus in truth the night before. Perhaps the soul just died, and he'd be going there before the next tenday regardless. It would be like her to make a show of destroying him for no reason but to shame him in front of strangers, only to pull him down to the pits a few days later.

Lae'zel visited him to force him to drink more broth, telling him that she would be heading out soon with Gale and Shadowheart. They planned to scout out as much territory as they could cover before nightfall; the location and defenses of the goblin camp, the crèche and her people. Wyll asked about the commotion he had heard and Lae'zel rolled her eyes. "The cleric and Astarion made themselves a bargain while we could not object. He says the fangs will grow back, and there is no harm done. She says the entire thing was his idea. Karlach says that if the Shadowheart touches the vampire again she'll start pulling *her* teeth out. You must recover quickly; I do not have the patience to settle their squabbling."

She asked if Wyll needed more of the honey salve applied to his burns and Wyll had to cover the hysterical laugh that escaped him by pretending to choke on broth, which led to him actually choking and Lae'zel pounding him on the back hard enough to make his eyes water. She then forced him to explain how it was possible to accidentally inhale soup, declared human anatomy "horribly designed", and was completely distracted from the idea of smearing more honey on his intimate parts. He did give in to temptation and ask for her to tie his hands together so he couldn't be tempted to scratch himself bloody. She refused.

"You are a warrior of great strength. Your self-control is equal to the task," she told him very seriously.

He appreciated the confidence she had in him but did not share it. Lae'zel at least left the tent flap propped open this time, which let a bit of a breeze into the tent and gave him something to look at. Not that he could see much with his head anchored in place by the damned horns, but he could at least track when the rest of them ate lunch and packed up to leave.

Astarion had been doing what looked like a circus performer's warm-up stretches, Karlach supporting him with the aid of a broken spear shaft. They finished and Karlach offered him a cup. Astarion drank, coloring his lips like a courtesan's paint with the blood. He licked the bowl clean, less desperate than he'd been the night before, but still refusing to waste a drop. Wyll's stomach squeezed in sympathy. He was desperately hungry, but didn't think he'd be able to keep down much of anything.

Astarion sprawled out in the sunlight and waved Karlach away; she came to sit by Wyll. "Hey soldier," she said. "You need anything?"

"More broth, maybe," he said reluctantly, and she fetched it for him. It was a strange sensation, being waited on. He was more used to dragging himself across camp to find his pack and dig through for healing potions, all alone. Of wrapping himself up in blankets and letting hunger duel it out with the pain of his injuries because there was no way for him to hunt or buy food until he recovered enough to walk. The strangeness made him tear up, and he had to blink it away hurriedly before Karlach returned.

"What were you doing with Astarion?" he asked.

"Oh, he has a whole routine for recovering from being murked too many times in a row, apparently. Lots of exercise, interspersed with little sips of blood, to break down the muscles and rebuild them. Vampire regeneration goes slower when you're starved, I guess. I thought he would just whoosh back to normal after that deer, but apparently gaining strength is slower than healing stab wounds." She met his eyes. "I don't have to repeat myself right? That you fucked up and I'm not letting you do it again."

"Message received," Wyll promised. "I didn't—I shouldn't have needed you to tell me that. I need to apologize to him, properly."

"Yeah, you should," she said. "But maybe you should sleep a little first? You look awful."

"I wish I could." He closed his eyes, let his fingers twitch against the blankets where they wanted to scrape the skin from his bones. "It's the itching. I am going insane."

"Oh, yeah. It really sucks, doesn't it?" Karlach said. "When I burned my arm—well, Zariel didn't want to use healing magic on me, so I was in that no-good agony stage a long time. But the itching afterwards? I felt like a dog covered in fleas. I wanted to roll around on the floor and rub my skin off like a snake. Gods, if I wouldn't burn you back to square one I'd offer to give you a massage, it's the only thing that ever helped me."

"Any chance you'd agree to find me something stronger to drink? Or hitting me very hard in the head?" Wyll asked.

“I think you’re probably not supposed to be getting yourself sloshed right after being deep-fried in hellfire,” Karlach said. “But fuck that, I’ll see what I can find. Our little secret.”

She found him something even better, a dark green bottle of unlabeled rum that burnt the tongue and left him pleasantly distant after only a few pulls. It had a burnt-caramel flavor that was a relief after the gamey and bitter taste of the broth Lae’zel had made for him. Nobody had told her that the fat from venison was wretched tasting, and he could hardly blame her for not knowing the particulars of Faerûnian butchering practices. Karlach left the bottle with him and went back to help Astarion. Wyll finally let himself relax enough to stop thinking as he watched them.

Astarion worked methodically, starting with his hands and moving downward through each muscle group as he made Karlach fetch him objects to lift and pull. He pulled Wyll’s bowstring back about as far as Wyll had as a child. He did it again. He did it again. He contorted himself and pressed himself up against the blanket like a snake rising from the grass. The burn across his back was pink and huge, the skin distorted like a melted wax figurine. Wyll’s burns had healed smooth—because they had poured so much more magic into him? Or a sign that he was fiend-touched? Wyll felt the shame of his indolence setting in as Astarion continued to move back through his exercises, tried to force himself back up off the ground. It was like his horns were a thousand pounds, keeping his head from lifting. Too much healing magic always left him loose-limbed and floppy like a ragdoll.

When his eyes drifted open again later, Karlach was at his side again with another bowl of broth. Wyll grimaced.

“This has got to be getting boring,” Karlach said. “But Lae’zel said you had to eat something and drink lots. Sorry.”

“No appreciation for the liquid diet?” Astarion said, lounging next to Karlach with a pile of cream-colored fabric in his lap. “Philistine.”

Wyll jolted in surprise, jammed the damn fucking infernal horns again and hissed in pain.

“Ouch.” Karlach frowned at him. “Do they not have any padding under your horns? Oh man, that’s no good, we gotta get you settled better than that. Worse than laying on your boobs when you first hit puberty, jamming something into your horns is a bitch.”

“Do they stay that sensitive forever?” Astarion asked, running a long piece of thread through his fingers. “One of my fellow spawn was a tiefling, Cazador always liked to manhandle the horns. I figured they must be delicate, he liked to go for the *sensitive* spots, but she would never answer my questions.”

Astarion delivered this pronouncement with a certain blunted delivery, like it was a casual bit of gossip. Karlach shrugged, seemingly taking it as such. “Gets less sensitive, but never goes away entirely. If you were to, like, pick someone up by the horns, that would hurt like a motherfucker. They’re fused to your skull, but there’s a lot of nerves running through the base.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Astarion said. Whether he meant he would avoid touching Wyll’s horns or take the first opportunity to down him with a kick to the skull was left open-ended.

“Can Wyll lean on you to keep his head off the ground?” Karlach asked.

Wyll, feeling a bit dizzy from this conversation, was trying to figure out why she was asking him to lean against himself when Astarion answered. “And where would I put my sewing, darling? Besides, you can hardly expect Wyll to be comfortable draping himself over a feral beast like myself. What if he smelled so delicious that I started drooling on him?”

Wyll flushed. The comparison seemed especially…wrong, with Astarion gesturing with his sewing needle like a player giving a monologue in some heroic tragedy.

“You know, I think I have you figured out, Astarion,” Karlach said dryly. “I told you I’m hard to annoy, and you’ve taken that as a challenge. Well, you’re going to have to try a lot harder than that to get me to toss you in the river, even if it would be very tempting. Stop being an ass.”

“He’s not being an ass, I deserved that,” Wyll said. “Astarion, I apologize. For my conduct in general, and for the comment about you being a feral creature. It is a term they use in the books I’d read, but that is no excuse.” For one thing, it was used in reference to a spawn that outlived its sire, and Astarion’s sire was very much still alive.

Astarion raised an eyebrow at him. “So you’re saying you *don’t* think I’m some overgrown pigeon liable to shit on you in the streets? I am so flattered, Saer Blade.” He sketched a bow at Wyll, red eyes watchful despite the ease with which he spoke. He was putting up a front of…something, Wyll wasn’t sure what. But he remembered that fear from the night before, the way Astarion had begged them not to hurt him and believed they would anyway. He didn’t think that fear had gone anywhere. It was simply hiding.

“Again, I apologize,” Wyll said. “There are no excuses for the way I treated you and allowed the others treat you. I will not let that happen again.”

Astarion stared at him, obviously waiting for some punchline. When it didn’t come, he made a disgusted noise in his throat and went back to his sewing. “You are sickeningly sincere,” Astarion snapped.

“I’m…sorry? In any case, Karlach, we don’t need to trouble Astarion. Perhaps just another blanket under my head would buffer the horns well enough.”

“I could sew them some little padded cozies, like you were a rescue goat with especially long and chilly ears,” Astarion suggested. “A woman once explained to me in a bar the minutiae of her passion for knitting ear warmers for baby goaats. Or was it cows? I couldn’t escape for nearly an hour, perhaps the most excruciating hour of my life. I thought she was going to start measuring my ears and knitting up a pair right then and there.”

Karlach laughed. “I’d pay money to see that, if I had any money. Once I get money, I will absolutely pay you to wear some nice stripey ear warmers.”

“No amount of money could convince me to wear anything so tacky.”

“What about blood? Could I bribe you in blood?” Karlach asked.

Astarion hissed at her and Karlach laughed again, grinning at Wyll like she’d won a wonderful prize, and they didn’t have a potentially hostile vampire glaring daggers at her over his needlework. “You were supposed to be feeding Wyll that disgusting smelling slop, you horrible woman,” Astarion said, after several minutes of aggressively tiny stitches. “It’s going to congeal if you let it get cold.”

“Right, yes,” Karlach said, seeming to remember the bowl in her hand. Wyll was lucky she hadn’t accidentally splattered it on him when she was laughing earlier. “…might be a bit congealed. I can dump it out and get you a fresh bowl?”

Wyll sighed. “I suppose you should.” If she dumped out this bowl it would be gone sooner.

“Just dump the whole pot, Karlach, I can’t stand the smell and he clearly hates it. The self-pitying routine is wearing on me,” Astarion said.

Karlach dipped her finger in the broth and licked it. She made a face. “Ugh. That tastes like the pits. Armpits of an imp, specifically. Why didn’t you say anything, Wyll?”

“It’s not so bad,” Wyll said.

“Go dump the pot, we can say a boar attacked the camp on a mission of revenge and took the whole thing down in the rampage. Or pretend Wyll drank it all.”

Karlach got up and shifted another folded blanket under Wyll’s head, this one underneath the horns. Then she left the tent, with Astarion still there. He didn’t look up at Wyll, one hand pinching the seam together and the other working the needle. He was blocking the view, Wyll couldn’t see what Karlach was doing, though he could hear the sound of clanking and sloshing as she presumably made short work of the rest of the broth. His stomach did feel a bit better, to not have to worry about drinking any more of it.

“Thank you,” he said to Astarion.

“Maybe I just wanted to get rid of her so I could kill you,” Astarion said.

“Did you?” Wyll doubted it. The vampire seemed far too intent on his sewing project.

“When we were in hell,” Astarion said, then stopped. “I don’t know what you saw. When we were mixed together.”

Wyll didn’t remember being aware of much at all, beyond their shared terror, their resignation of pain to come. That kind touches always proceeded cruelty, that there was a wheel that never stopped. When he’d woken he had known, viscerally, that Cazador Szarr was a man to be terrified of, despite not knowing his name.

Astarion continued: “I just wanted to say that, if you keep your mouth shut, I am willing to do the same. No one else needs know.”

“I would rather never speak of what happened last night ever again, with anyone,” Wyll admitted. “I have no interest digging into your torments, Astarion. It’s hardly any of my business.”

“It isn’t,” Astarion agreed. “And you don’t want…anything in particular, in return for this favor?”

“It’s not a favor to avoid doing what I had no intention or interest in ever doing,” Wyll said. “So no.”

“Right. Good.” Astarion tied off the thread, then lifted it to his mouth as if to bite it off. He stopped, then set the shirt back down. Wyll had seen the spaces between his teeth, where the canines were pointedly missing. He had forgotten the furor earlier over them; Astarion didn’t speak with a lisp despite their absence and his teeth rarely seemed to show while he was talking. Probably an important skill in a vampire spawn that did not wish to be staked in public. It seemed rude to comment on it, though he couldn’t imagine why Astarion would have agreed to let Shadowheart pull them out. He was already perilously outnumbered amongst them.

Astarion interrupted his rubbernecking by suddenly pushing his sewing project aside and saying: “There’s no need to be so damnably calm about all this, you know. Most people, they get turned into a monster, there are hysterics. Begging. Rending of clothes. Everyone’s waiting for you to have your obligatory breakdown, you might as well get it out of the way.”

“I’m lacking in clothing to rend, just at the present moment,” Wyll said. Though he was very thankful that he’d been given a blanket to drape over the bandages, however much the pressure of it made him more aware of the itching. The idea of talking to Astarion while completely naked except for a thin layer of bandages was excruciating. “And hysterics sound exhausting.”

“You are not well in the head,” Astarion pronounced. “You are far too calm.”

“I am, perhaps, slightly drunk,” Wyll said, remembering the rum. He reached out for it, but Astarion grabbed it first. He considered the bottle, removed the cork and sniffed it.

“Awful,” Astarion said, then took a swig. He scooted closer to Wyll, wobbling slightly, before settling beside him and lifting Wyll up onto his lap so his shoulders were propped up and he could drink. His legs were pleasantly cool, though the bones pressed sharply into Wyll’s back. “Not really a proper breakdown, politely day-drinking,” Astarion complained as he helped Wyll drink more of the bottle. Perhaps more than he ought have on a mostly-empty stomach, but there was a good chance Shadowheart and Lae’zel would object to him drinking anything once they arrived back in camp. He was hoping to have managed enough before then that he could pass out rather than lie awake all night conscious of the itching.

“Are you really naked under there?” Astarion asked. “Have you checked whether you’ve been gifted a special infernal dick? I think you ought to figure that out before ruling out hysterics.”

“I am not having this conversation,” Wyll said firmly, pressing the blanket down with his hands in case Astarion got the urge to peek.

“Well, unless that bottle started mostly empty, you’re going to find out soon enough,” Astarion reasoned. “Unless fiends don’t have to piss. Which of us is supposed to be helping you with that? Because I am a horrible nursemaid and Karlach is on fire.”

They both had to help him, and it was so mortifying Wyll let the Blade carry him through the experience. They didn’t even make it out of the tent, since Astarion wasn’t nearly recovered enough to help him walk and Karlach couldn’t touch him. It wasn’t that he’d never been so injured that he couldn’t leave his bedroll before, he just usually didn’t have an audience to the shame. At least they pretended to leave him his dignity—Astarion helped him kneel from behind, Karlach held their improvised helmet chamberpot and looked away. His hands were shaky, but he could unwrap the bandages himself and—

She’d changed him, which he had known without even looking. He should probably have been grateful that she hadn’t burnt it off entirely, or given him something inhumanly spiked and monstrous, but it was just one more thing. One more thing that had been *his*, that she had made into hers. It was stupid to want to cry over it; he wasn’t exactly in a position to pursue courting anyone with her holding his leash and death at their heels. He hadn’t been doing anything with it. It shouldn’t have mattered.

Even Astarion, who Wyll was now sure was purposefully needling him in an attempt to see how far he could push before someone retaliated violently, didn’t make jokes after that. He went back to his sewing and Wyll went back to trying not to think about anything. Karlach told horrific stories about Avernus and cooked them porridge using some of the supplies the druids had sent back with Gale and Lae’zel. It was only a little burned and Wyll managed to choke some of it down.

Several hours later, Astarion finished his shirt; the voluminous sleeves had been slimmed down to a close fit and the spare fabric patched into a new back piece. In order to manage the transformation he’d needed to unstitch them from the armholes entirely, add triangular gussets and then sew them back in place. Astarion complained that the fit wasn’t quite right, but Wyll remained impressed—Astarion had managed it without use of a tailor’s tape or any patterns, everything measured by eye and the fabric ripped rather than cut with shears. His only tools had been a single needle borrowed from Wyll’s supply pack and a bit of candle wax to coat the thread, which he had been unraveling from the remains of his gambeson lining.

The holes and rips and bits that had been burned through by Shadowheart’s sacred flame had been stitched closed, darned, and patched. The side seams of the shirt were pulled in, and the lower hem brought up to yield more scrap fabric for mending, everything done with incredibly precise stitches that seemed to unerringly follow a perfectly straight line. Wyll had attempted to learn the mending cantrip a few years into his travels, which was only somewhat compatible with Mizora’s magic and thus generally failed at the worst moments. While it lasted it would look better than his attempts at sewing, which tended to scrawl across the fabric in uneven zigzags and still never seemed to last as long as they ought. Astarion’s technique seemed much more involved than Wyll’s attempts, first tacking the layers of fabric

with a coarse stitch that held them in place for the actual seam. He then folded the seams up and under so the raw edges were tucked inside, in a process that seemed to require more than two hands, before sewing the whole seam a *second* time. In all, it was surprising he finished the project before darkness fell over the camp. Especially since he had to interrupt his work to complete his exercising circuit several more times and aid Wyll in getting up and down from his pile of blankets.

An hour in, Wyll suggested that Astarion might just wait for Gale to return and aid him with his mending cantrip. Astarion stared at him like he had two heads and informed him that mending cantrips performed by wizards "who haven't a clue whether they're looking at a twill or a plain weave" were inevitably "fused together like an amateur pottery project", the weave of the fabric disrupted and never laying properly afterwards. He pointed out the mends Gale had made in Wyll's blankets, which, now that he inspected them carefully, did look to be smeared together at the repairs like the threads had melted together.

The itching never faded, but the alcohol made it bearable. He dozed and drifted, ate what he was given and drank the water Karlach insisted on. By the time night fell, the initial ragdoll-weakness of magical healing had passed, a little. He managed to limp out to the fire, Karlach and Astarion at either shoulder to catch him if he collapsed. A few packs and rolled up blankets were enough to prop him up so he could sit. The horns were still incredibly uncomfortable, making his head feel like it weighed a hundred pounds, an unpleasant counterpoint to the symphony of itching. Still, it was good to be up.

By the next day he thought he'd be able to hike, if not fight. Or, at the very least, nobody would need to waste time waiting on him. He could defend camp by himself even if he wasn't mobile; as long as he had access to his magic he could fend off a lone beast or attacker.

Astarion, despite his diligence in attending to his routine, didn't seem much more lively than Wyll at the end of it all. He complained bitterly about the fact he wasn't fully recovered, staring Wyll in the face and drinking another cup of boar blood in aggrieved sips. They hadn't talked about his missing fangs, because Wyll couldn't figure out a way to bring it up without sounding like he pitied the vampire or thought he was a lunatic. Astarion seemed far more upset that consuming most of a boar and all of a deer over the course of a day hadn't caused him to regenerate the muscle that had been burnt up by hellfire. He implied that previous times he'd been forced to recover from such privation had been slow and agonizing, stretched out between mouthfuls of rat blood.

Wyll tried not to feel like Astarion was directing these comments directly at him, for his failure in not realizing there had been a vampire lord in Baldur's Gate. He tried not to remember the way it had felt when Mizora had touched them in Nessus and he'd felt Astarion's twinned relief and horror, familiar acceptance of torture interrupted. He tried not to remember anything at all.

The others arrived back in camp in a sullen silence, spotlessly clean from the boots on up in a way that spoke of repeated applications of prestidigitation and some disastrous encounter that had necessitated it. Gale sat down on his bedroll, then lay down with a moan. "Forget magehand," he declared. "Someone needs to invent magefeet. I am dying."

Shadowheart and Lae'zel broke to opposite sides of the campfire, like two magnets fleeing each other. They glared, the air between them even more hostile than it had seemed when they left.

"Good scouting, though?" Karlach asked, ignoring the tension.

"We walked from one end of the Chionthar to the other," Gale declared. "And discovered various things about each other, which I daresay *someone* should speak of so that Wyll and Karlach and, I suppose Astarion, can join us all in honest disclosure."

Like pulling teeth—actually, apparently with more reluctance than she pulled teeth—Shadowheart revealed that she was Sharran and that she had been on a mission to recover some sacred Githyanki artifact for her goddess. Gale showed it to them, a small metal prism with runes etched on the side. They'd discovered she was carrying it when they were scouting at the goblin encampment within an abandoned temple of Selûne. Some psychic force had attempted to mind control them, as the other cultists were controlled, and the artifact had protected them.

"Now give it to Wyll," Shadowheart ordered, after Gale finished that explanation. "If I'm not allowed to carry it, you aren't either. I'm not having you *eat* it."

And so Wyll was handed the artifact, and it was Gale's turn to explain that he was, apparently, going to explode if he didn't consume magical artifacts sufficiently quickly to satisfy the cursed Netherese magic portal that was burned into his chest. And that he had been secretly taking magic items from their camp supplies and consuming them while they were away and he was supposed to be watching Astarion. Everyone looked at Astarion for him to confirm this. He flinched back under their scrutiny.

"What?" he spat. "Was I supposed to be tattling on wizards? Sometimes they fondle magical items and make sex noises, I assumed that was normal wizard behavior."

Gale turned beet red and protested the innocence of the noises he made while consuming their shared camp supplies in secret. They then took a vote on whether to kick him from the party, which Gale seemed to think they might decide to do. Absurd of him, when they had agreed to keep *Wyll*.

He thought Gale's behavior seemed fit for a classic tragedy, a hero so blinded by hubris and the overwhelming power of the gods that he might think a goddess's interest was something more than it could be. For gods did not take lovers as people did, they took supplicants and used them till their beauty or devotion lost their novelty and then discarded them. There were myths about such things older than Baldur's Gate. But there were myths about warlocks and their hubris as well, so Wyll tried not to judge, even if Gale still seemed to think Mystra might have loved him as an equal if he'd succeeded in his mission. For all that Gale was much older than him, Wyll had a head start in knowing he was doomed.

Scouting the goblin camp had turned into infiltration when they were spotted by perimeter guards—but with the tadpoles marking them as the chosen of the cult's goddess they had managed to avoid hostilities. There, they had learned several things besides the artifact's role in their continuing sanity. There were three "True Soul" leaders of the Cult of the Absolute in

the encampment and they were looking for the artifact, pushing to find the Githyanki crèche and Druid grove in their search for it. None of the goblins they'd spoken to remembered capturing the druid Halsin. And the place was a warren, hostiles dug in with sentries and war drums alert to any attack, goblin children packed in with raiders and cultists. Attacking it head-on would be suicide, waiting for the war party to set out for the grove and attacking it en-route hardly less perilous. And everyone in camp was mind controlled, or might be, so Wyll would have their deaths on his conscience, whatever approach they took. If they killed only the leaders, the followers might just be drawn to another cult encampment or continue to act as a unified force by the power of whatever was controlling them. But yet he couldn't let the Elturel refugees become victims because he was too squeamish to act.

The obvious approach was to infiltrate by stealth or sabotage. Poison or fire could weaken them enough for a headlong attack; but if Halsin was still alive and his capture was simply not known amongst rabble they might inadvertently kill him as well. And they couldn't rule out the possibility that killing the cult leaders, or perhaps destroying some artifact or beacon in their possession might free the goblins from the cult's control. Since the tadpoles allowed them to infiltrate by stealth, they ought to be able to target an attack on the leaders. Shatter their discipline and give themselves a fighting chance at finding Halsin, escaping with their lives.

They reached this conclusion and then, again, everyone looked at Astarion. There was an obvious problem in attempting to infiltrate anywhere with a captive on a leash beside them. Astarion protested that he had no interest in being taken by a mind-controlling cult by betraying them, and Wyll believed him. Astarion might want them all dead and a hundred miles behind him, but only if that hundred miles brought him somewhere nice, like a townhouse in Waterdeep. Karlach pointed out that having him restrained would still give away to the goblins that they weren't all equal-ranked True Souls.

"Well then, clearly you'll have to just exercise a little trust," Astarion said, batting his eyes at her coquettishly. "I have been very trustworthy today, haven't I? Besides, you're all armed to the teeth and I've been defanged, at your cleric's request. For the next few days, anyway."

"You could take a weapon from one of us and slit our throats," Lae'zel said. "Or turn tail and run once we're engaged in battle."

Astarion rolled his eyes. "Well, if you think keeping me at your mercy is more important than saving all those poor pathetic refugees, I suppose that's on your conscience."

"That was the bargain you offered, Astarion," Wyll reminded him. "Your good behavior in exchange for assurances of everyone's safety. If you want to renegotiate, it would be easiest to just keep you here in camp, as we have been. We could make you comfortable, keep you well-fed—"

"Ah, so I could be your pet. Is that what you'd like, *pup*? And after you had me declawed, so I can't scratch the furniture," Astarion sneered, rolling over the words in a mimicry of Mizora's cadence. His eyes sparked with hatred.

Bile rose in Wyll's throat, and he couldn't say anything. He didn't have to, because everyone else turned on Astarion and told him he'd gone too far. That's what Karlach said, anyway.

Lae'zel and Shadowheart were considerably less nice. Astarion didn't flinch, burning with anger that he reserved, apparently, only for Wyll. Karlach had to yell to get everyone to settle down again.

"You should apologize to Wyll," she said to Astarion.

"I will not spend the last days of my life trapped in a cage, no matter how soft you make it. You agreed. We had a bargain. I won't just let you cage me again, you backstabbing little—"

Karlach picked up Gale's boot and thumped Astarion with it. "Stop panicking, idiot. You know I won't let them do that."

Astarion panted, staring at her, wide-eyed. There was something to that panic, not just a wanderlust or a hunger for escape attempts or mortal blood. Wyll had clearly stepped on some landmine, some history back in Baldur's Gate.

Or perhaps not. Mizora used to offer him a more comfortable captivity, at nights when he was stiff with pain or cold or hunger. When she thought he might be vulnerable to temptation. She would offer her taunts made flesh, him as a hellhound at her feet, fed well on scraps and safe from danger. It had been repulsive. He had made several unwise declarations to her that she'd made him regret. So maybe he could understand how much worse it would be, to be powerless against the coming doom even if you weren't in pain.

"We have no need to renegotiate deals," Lae'zel declared. "We located Crèche Y'llek and will journey there first, to put an end to these parasites. We may even recruit them against this cult, for it is clearly a Ghaik plot to capture victims and create an army on this plane. Any Gith would fight against such evils."

Gale went back to the telling and put the rest of their scouting mission in order. They'd dispersed a cultist ambush in an abandoned village on the way to the goblin encampment; there they'd allied with some surprisingly intelligent ogres and been gifted a battle horn to call them in a future fight. They also freed a gnome, which Astarion sneered at for some godforsaken reason. They'd hiked up to the Risen Road and encountered more cultists who'd picked a fight with an owlbear. There was supposedly an inn up there, and they'd seen a Flaming Fist patrol who must have been based out of that inn—in time to see them killed by a Githyanki patrol. There was a dragon involved. The Gith had pressed Lae'zel into service hunting for the artifact and pointed them in the direction of the crèche where it should be delivered. She hadn't revealed that Gale was holding the artifact at that moment, probably saving them from being incinerated in dragon-fire. She was clearly shaken by her failure to reveal it, and furious to be shaken, and certain that they needed to go immediately to the crèche in order to make restitution for her disloyalty.

"Once we are freed of the Ghaik parasites and destroy these cultists, there will be no need of the artifact for protection and it can be returned to the kith'rak," Lae'zel concluded.

"I am bound to deliver it to my goddess," Shadowheart said.

"And she can instead accept our hospitality in removing the worm from the head of her thief instead of removing their head from their shoulders," Lae'zel said. "She is a goddess. If she

needs Vlaakith's treasures, let her treat with her as gods do and bargain for it."

"We don't know that handling this encampment will stop the cult, so let's not get too far ahead of ourselves," Wyll said. "For now, we need the artifact. If we give it to the Githyanki and become cultists it will serve no one except this supposed 'Absolute'. Lae'zel is right, they are either Illithid themselves or allied with them if they're using the mindflayer tadpoles as means of recruitment."

Shadowheart spoke Wyll's doubts out to the group—would the Githyanki *actually* be willing to purify outsiders? Lae'zel insisted they would, that she had sworn it would be so and that other Gith would respect that oath. Wyll wished he shared her confidence. But their party grew increasingly tied together, it seemed. Lae'zel would go nowhere except to the crèche; and she could not leave them while they held the artifact without risking insanity. They didn't know how much danger they had been in thus far, splitting their party and leaving some at camp away from the artifact's protection. And even if she could have, Lae'zel *wouldn't* leave the artifact without a fight. Their choices were to follow her to the crèche or fight her.

Everyone looked to Wyll for some reason, as if he was supposed to provide answers. Shadowheart and Lae'zel were still both standing, and neither of them had set down their weapons. Shadowheart's hand tightened on the haft of her mace and she looked at him, pleading for him to take her side. But gods, he didn't want them to fight. He didn't want to lose any of them. He had fantasized for years about having allies who would hold by him even if they knew the truth, who would take up arms to protect him—it had been his most pathetic and oft-repeated fantasy after he gave up on his father's forgiveness. He knew that this was only a temporary reprieve, that if the mindflayer parasites were dealt with Mizora would have no reason to allow him this. But he couldn't help hoping that, somehow, they would find a way to keep him.

"We will go to the crèche," he said, and hoped Shadowheart would forgive him. What Lae'zel offered her was almost amnesty, in her way: to take back the Githyanki relic but seek no punishment for its theft was probably heretical, given that the Sharrans must have taken it by blood. "But I do not like the thought of carrying an artifact hunted by Githyanki into their own domain and hoping that luck prevents them from noticing it. Lae'zel, you will need to coach us in what you can of psionic shielding. And Gale, I'll ask that you provide us one more miracle and see if there's any way to cloak the presence of the artifact. Were you able to devise something for our bargain with Astarion?"

Gale finally sat up from where he was collapsed on his bedroll. "Possibly! I had a great deal of time to think about it on our walk back, everyone else was uninterested in conversation. I considered a modified version of the Snare spell, but then with some elements of the greater Binding enchantment…which is greatly beyond my capacity at the moment. But since we're not attempting to bind an unwilling interplanar entity with a conjunct antipathy field, a great deal could be simplified. And any magic is easier if you combine the support of physical talismans and complete it on willing participants! I think it will work best if we have a two party tether—the spell will bind him so that he must stay within arms reach of one of the two volunteers, but he could pass between them if someone needed to, say, throw themselves into combat against a dragon. By borrowing from the intangible tether of Binding we can adjust it

to be more practical for traveling and impossible to remove by lock picking or other mundane means." He turned and looked directly at Astarion. "Would that be acceptable?"

Astarion considered it. "Where would the spell be anchored? I'm not wearing a collar."

"Wrist would work fine, if that's your preference," Gale said. "I might have to increase the range slightly to accommodate people's tendency to wave their arms about, but we could do that."

"What would break the spell?" Astarion asked. "What if one of the people I'm tied to dies? I don't want to be trapped forever because someone fell off a cliff and I'm tied to their mangled skeleton."

"Would the spell break if *you* die, Gale?" Shadowheart asked. "Because, annoying as you are, I don't want to incentivize anyone stabbing you in your sleep."

"I did think of that, thank you for asking," Gale said. "The ties hold regardless of death, but since you only have to be within arm's reach of *one* of the two, you won't get pulled off a cliff as long as we don't all fall off cliffs. And I'll put the power into the physical components of the spell, such that it can power itself for three days. Assuming we're not all dead in three days, I can cast it again then. I think three days is about the limit of power I have available tonight. Any other questions?"

Lae'zel crossed her arms. "Who, exactly, is going to volunteer for this? I cannot come to the crèche chained like a captive."

"Intangible magic bindings, but no, you're right. I and Shadowheart are in similarly difficult positions, because we need to be able to concentrate to sustain certain spells that are essential in battle. It would be very easy to sabotage us with minimal effort, and I haven't thought of a workaround to prevent that."

"I am not being *bound* to a vampire," Shadowheart hissed.

"The feeling is mutual, darling," Astarion said.

"So that leaves me and Karlach," Wyll said. And, alright, that did make sense. Karlach threw herself headfirst into battle, but Wyll was capable of doing ranged combat if necessary. And as the one who'd set them on the path of taking and keeping Astarion, who'd been the first one to kill him, he certainly had an obligation to take some responsibility for him.

"Yes! Team Fangs and Friends!" Karlach pumped her fist in triumph. Then she remembered: "Minus the fangs, I guess."

Astarion sighed. "Well, I suppose you've met my criteria, neither tied down nor tied up. Could be worse, I was half expecting Gale would suggest mind control."

"Charm person is surprisingly useless on people with the intelligence to resist it, and Geas is difficult to apply to complex scenarios," Gale said. "Also, I can't cast either of those currently."

“I know Command,” Wyll said, “And so does Shadowheart. So don’t plan on taking my sword and stabbing anyone, or biting—” he remembered a moment too late.

Astarion smiled at him and poked his tongue into the holes where his fangs were supposed to be, emphasizing that Wyll had gotten too far into that bottle of rum to be allowed to determine important decisions. “Mm, well I don’t think that will be a problem, hero. So what do you think? Are you willing to be tied down? Shackled to a monster?” He asked, flippantly.

Wyll met his eyes. Astarion could pretend he wasn’t taking this seriously, but Wyll could see the tension in him, how his motions had become increasingly exaggerated, like a marionette poorly puppetted ever since the rest of the party returned. They didn’t have to take Astarion’s bargain. If they walked it back, if they wanted to keep him safe and cossetted, imprisoned in camp, they had the power to force him. Even Karlach wouldn’t walk away now that they knew what the artifact was keeping them from. And as long as Astarion was well-treated, he didn’t think she’d fight either.

But he knew what it was, to be trapped and unable to even wish for death to free you.

He knew what it was to be a monster, even if only now did others see it on his face.

“I’m willing if you are,” he said.

Chapter 9: Lae'zel

Chapter Notes

> Part 1 of our 2 part Lae'zel chapters, wherein the adventurers actually do some adventuring!
>
> also! that tooth-extraction one-shot I promised has been posted! you would have no way of knowing that, but I put it in a series with this fic to make it easier to find. Or you can check here at pain-free dentistry.

Shadowheart does not attempt to kill her while she sleeps; Lae’zel finds herself disappointed for it.

It had been the obvious thing to do. They were finally turned towards the crèche at Lae’zel’s insistence, as they should have from the start, and only her death would turn them away from it. The Sharran was a thief, a coward, and a killer of Gith. It would be the simplest thing to set Crèche Y'llek upon her and have them render justice; her survival rested upon Lae’zel’s honor. Liars and thieves had little trust in honor.

It would have been a disappointment regardless. There was no question of the victor in a contest of strength, and Lae’zel had better reflexes than to sleep through someone going for her throat. Killing her would have been a waste. For all that the Sharran was is’tark and enemy of the Gith, by the bonds to her treacherous goddess, her magics were a useful weapon in their fight against the ghaik. A weapon should not leave your hand until it was too broken to break flesh.

The thought of Shadowheart, broken, executed for her crimes against Vlaakith left a bitter taste in her mouth. It was no less than Shadowheart deserved. And by protocol, it was Lae’zel’s duty to carry out such a charge once she was aware of the crime. Yet she had sworn she would not.

The Kith’rac sought the artifact in Vlaakith’s name, and she had not revealed its presence. She had sworn she would not, not yet. Not while the ghaik-worshiping cult infested the lands and twisted minds and threatened to enthrall them.

These things she did for a higher purpose: to use the weapons she had been given against Vlaakith’s enemies; to help her scour the infection of ghaik-worship from these lands. Her rrakkma had been killed without spilling ghaik blood, but she had found herself a new vengeance band who might see her first avenged. These were the things she reasoned to herself as she laid out defenses for her actions. For her failures to follow protocol. For valuing her own life over the wishes of the Kith’rac, an impossible arrogance that would see her—

There was no other way. She served, and she served loyally. The artifact would be dealt with after their minds were cleansed and the cult's magic scoured from the land. There was no other way.

The tension she carried into sleep was from the threat of attack, leading her into unsettling dreams of a barren place in the Astral Sea and a figure that looks like one of her long-dead cousins. A creature spinning fantasies of holding back the parasites. She awakened herself from the dream when the creature began to goad her into making a feast of herself by taking in more of the abominations.

It was early, darkness only lifting at the edges of the world. She wondered at the peculiar beauty of the sun's motion on this plane, the way the colors shifted from blue to yellow to red without ever shading to green. Like the plants that choked the landscape had stolen the green from the sky but left it every other hue. She went to the river to bathe while the others slept, hoping the cold would draw her mind closer to clarity. She stood on the bank and waited for the air to dry her enough to don her armor, polished each piece as if for morning inspection by her sa'varsh.

In camp, she brewed more of Gale's tea and drank it hot enough to burn.

She was alone at the campfire as she waited for the rest to wake. Every night thus far the campfire had held them close, even after they assembled tents and made motions to set them up for sleeping. But Shadowheart and Gale had abandoned her for their tents, fleeing the wretched silence that followed them back from the mountain pass. Wyll and the tiefling had moved their bedrolls out of camp to quiet Shadowheart's anxieties, the magic binding forcing the vampire to follow with them. They were sleeping still, bracketing him, Astarion wrapped in blankets and pressed nearly against Karlach's side. Wyll lay on his back, body slackened by the drink he had poured too freely. They might not yet reach the crèche that night if Wyll could not bear the journey. She might have one more day—

She shouldn't wish for further delays.

But there were, of course, delays. First for them to wake, then for everyone to belabor the strange dreams they'd had in the night. Apparently the delusion claiming to bind the parasite had afflicted all of them. None were eager to follow it's twisted advice, but some seemed willing to accept that the artifact's power might come from a phantasm.

Then there was the delay for breakfast and for Gale to brew another pot of tea, complaining of Lae'zel's technique. He scolded her on the difference between brewing and stewing tea leaves; she let him ramble. The vampire finished the last of the blood that had been set aside and held in magic suspension. Then they realized Wyll had no clothing suitable for the journey. He had slept in a tattered undershirt and Gale's sleep pants since all of his armor and clothing had burnt in the fire. The shirt covered little, revealed fragile-pink skin. That could be solved by a blanket pinned over his shoulders into a cape, but he also had no shoes. Karlach ran ahead to the abandoned village to steal a few pairs of boots off the dead bodies there.

In the wait, Wyll and Astarion tested the boundaries of the binding spell again. They could step apart, but not far before the magic flared, suddenly visible as a cord of light tying one

wrist to the other. The braided cords that Gale had bound the spell into had disappeared and were only visible as black markings on the skin around their wrists. They had enough slack that, when Astarion was forced to follow Wyll to the pit latrine they had dug beyond the treeline, he could loiter by the trees with his back turned, complaining vociferously. The vampire had been surprisingly mouthy since they'd made their bargain. It spoke like it breathed—reflexively, and seemingly without the awareness that it could stop.

The vampire was a problem, though not one she had broached with the group.

That Lae'zel herself was due purification was beyond doubt. She was a child of Vlaakith. She would argue for the purification of the others under whatever pretense necessary—as revrykal that served her, recruited mercenaries against the ghaik cult, experiments on the peculiar parasites that had shown no symptoms of beginning their transformation even with their time nearly run out. But she was not sure that she could convince a ghustil to spend crèche resources on purifying an undead creature, not when it would be simpler to carve it out of his eye. She needed to wait until she had met the crèche's ghustil to judge.

Karlach returned, steaming in the morning air and carrying a bundle of clothing hooked on the end of a spear. She was magnificent, and Lae'zel was eager to see her in battle again, for no doubt they would not make it to the crèche without some misadventure. Nothing was simple in these lands.

After Gale cleaned the stench of rot from the clothes, Wyll reluctantly sorted through. He laced on a shirt that opened fully in the front and padded cloth armor that was only slightly singed from Karlach's handling, gritting his teeth as it brushed against his skin. Astarion raided the pile with more enthusiasm, discarded his impractical and stiff leather shoes in favor of trying on each pair of boots.

Meanwhile, Gale argued in favor of further delays. They had discovered a subterranean passage beneath the abandoned apothecary's shop but been thwarted in their investigations by a trapped mirror. Gale had taken a journal from one of the skeleton-guarded coffins and apparently discovered its dead owner had a connection to the place where his magic affliction originated.

"It's barely a detour, since we were going to go through the village anyways," Gale argued. "There's likely more healing potions and supplies in the workshop; it would be good to stock up. And it will give Astarion here a chance to test his skills at locks and traps before we make our way to our actual destination. A trial run! Very practical."

She should not have wished for more delays.

They had cleared the village of enemies yesterday, but, of course, now Wyll had to stop and use the death-magic amulet to learn the names of the refugees whose clothes they'd taken. "Their families may yet wait in the Grove," he insisted, before having Shadowheart send their stiff and bloated corpses, what was left by scavengers, to ash. Always ready to leap to the defense of the dead. He was a strange man, but he brought so much dedication to his absurdity. It was almost admirable.

The village was built of stone; a place meant to endure longer than it had. The wood and plaster that was built up from that solid foundation had warped and rotted, but the stone held. The apothecary building was much the same as the rest except for the wooden hatch leading down to the basement underneath.

Wyll struggled on the ladder into the basement and slipped, dragging Astarion down through the hatch by the magic binding, wrist-first.

Astarion would have landed on top of Wyll if Lae'zel did not have superior reflexes to catch the vampire. Shadowheart scurried down after them and offered Wyll another healing potion. Gale offered him some dried meat from the roast boar. Karlach offered apologies that she hadn't stayed next to Astarion to keep the spell content.

"Test run, wasn't it?" Astarion said, brushing off his clothes in an affected nonchalance. Lae'zel had felt him, corpse stiff beneath her hands when she set him to the ground. He did not hide his fear as well as he pretended. "Now we know what happens if Wyll falls off a cliff. Very educational. Lead on, gracious captors!"

He had insisted on calling them as such ever since Wyll rebuffed his attempt to be turned loose as one of their allies.

The cellar was full dark except for Gale's magic lights, further evidence that this ghustil had been a magic user. Not that further evidence was needed—there was an enchanted mirror guarded by skeletal summons in the hidden passageway beyond.

While Gale and Wyll played guessing games with a mirror, she waited in the patch of sunlight that came down through a crack in the cavern ceiling. A little grass grew in that space, alien life taking root in a place it was never intended. She kicked at it. Its roots were spindly and easy to dislodge on the thin, sandy ground. Which was why grass wasn't supposed to grow in caverns.

By their combined efforts, Wyll and Gale managed to convince the mirror to grant them passage.

The room beyond was another cellar, this one guarded by mounted corpses and skeletons of beasts. The air was stale and slightly sweet with rot. Astarion went in first, Karlach a step behind as they inspected the room for traps. When they called the all-clear, Lae'zel joined them in raiding shelves and storage chests. Some of the potions were unlabeled, and she forced Shadowheart to leave them be. Bad enough to take supplies weakened by time and brewed by the sort of madman who hid his valuables behind a magic mirror. They would not gamble on mystery tinctures.

In a chest they found a pair of enchanted bracers, leather covered with silver filigree. Gale deemed the enchantment protective and passed them to Wyll.

"Does anyone else want them?" Wyll asked, running his fingers over the seams in the leatherwork appreciatively.

"Soldier, they're yours," Karlach said.

“I think they’re worried you’ll swoon if we run into trouble,” Astarion said with a flutter of his hands. “Put them on before they start offering to swaddle you like a little baby.”

Wyll flushed, embarrassed to be seen weak in front of allies. They ought to have allowed him longer to rest in camp, but the ghaik parasites did not allow them the luxury of time.

“Anyway, more importantly, the first test has arisen,” Gale said, calling Astarion over to an iron door blocking access to a small alcove. There was a desk inside and a large book on top of it. “There looks to be a valuable magic book in here, but the damn door is locked. Could you, you know, make yourself useful? As previously discussed.”

“Oh yes, I do love to be useful,” Astarion said with a roll of his eyes. He accepted the leather roll of picks and tools from Gale and went to sit in front of the lock and fiddle with it. His eyes closed as he worked, testing one with one pick and then another.

Astarion had wanted to carry the picks himself, but Shadowheart had objected that a few of the tools were thin and sharp enough to stab someone with. Her complaints were growing exhausting. Astarion was clearly incapable of taking them all out with a lockpick; they each carried a scroll of revivify. In the unlikely event he managed to take down any of them with one, reprisal would be swift. They all knew that. And now they had to wait through him familiarizing himself with the tools, even before the slow testing of the lock, which continued for an inordinate amount of time.

Lae’zel crossed her arms. “How long will this take?” Ideally they would arrive at the crèche before nightfall, when unexpected guests were inspected with greater scrutiny.

“This is a very annoying lock, actually,” Astarion snapped. “If you wouldn’t interrupt me?”

“Shadowheart could take a turn,” Lae’zel suggested. The Sharran was mostly useless at lockpicking, but if she broke a pin off inside the lock they’d be forced to abandon the project entirely. “Or Wyll could blast off the hinges.”

“Or we could leave the book here, since otherwise someone is going to have to carry it,” Shadowheart said.

“Let him work for a few minutes, Lae,” Wyll said. “Better now than with a locked door blocking our escape from an ambush.”

“You are not my varsh, and you do not name me, Wyll. Speak it properly or not at all,” she said. She had ignored his lapse earlier, thinking the overfamiliarity borne of pain and not… sentiment.

Wyll apologized, quite sincerely, and swore to use her name in full henceforth. Good. It was not for istik to declare such familiarity with one of Vlaakith’s children.

The moment the lock clicked, Gale pushed the vampire aside and opened the gate. “Finally!” he declared.

Astarion rolled to his feet and grabbed for the back of Gale’s robe. “It’s trapped, you moron!”

Gale looked between the book, sitting suspiciously on a raised section of the table, and the open-mouthed gargoyles facing him on either side. “Ah. That may well be the case. I suppose I’ll just…let you handle that as well.”

Retreating backwards, he let Astarion slip into the space, where the vampire proceeded to waste an inordinately long amount of time inspecting mechanisms within the desk before finally finding the catch to open up the back of the gargoyle statues and dismantle the firing mechanism inside. Lae’zel used the clear space in the center of the room to practice her sword forms while the rest of them loitered in indolence.

After all of that, when Gale fetched his prize, Shadowheart immediately demanded they burn it. Gale’s description of the book as “possibly valuable” and “magic” had elided that he knew exactly what book it was—a forbidden necromancy tome from the same land as the cursed magic Gale had already been afflicted with. The cover of the book was in the shape of a face, screaming, trying to escape. Subtlety was clearly not valued amongst Thayans. Now that it was closer to her, she could almost hear whispers in the air around it, an aura of dark magic.

Wyll suggested they vote on the issue.

Shadowheart said that tangling themselves with more curses and haunted artifacts was, above all else, an impractical waste of time. Lae’zel was forced to agree with her. If Gale wanted to turn himself into a lich in the imitation of the greatness of Vlaakith, that was his decision. If he wanted to do so while traveling with her, that was another matter. Gale protested valiantly that the book wasn’t necessarily cursed and that he could most certainly be trusted with powerful artifacts and forbidden knowledge, which made Astarion start laughing at him. The vampire was not asked to contribute to the debate, but that was certainly a vote of some sort.

They burned the book. Or, rather, Shadowheart burned the book, because it was completely resistant to mortal fire. Gale covered his eyes like a yank pretending their classmates wouldn’t die if they didn’t see them bleed out. But the radiant magic broke the enchantment on the book, and it burned like any mortal thing.

And then three shadow specters appeared in the dark room to kill them over it.

They would not be traveling together long enough for her to worry about their poor combat tactics. In a rrakkma, a Gith talented in psionics would lead in combat and direct the movements of all others. Githyanki worked in perfect coordination with each of their fellows, knew each for their strengths, used those strengths to ensure there were no openings for their enemies. There could be no weaknesses when fighting ghaik.

They stopped north of the village to refill waterskins from the river and Lae’zel cataloged the disaster they had just escaped. Their spellcasters had not bothered to brief them on what magics they were capable of or planned for the tactics of a small underground space with a single escape route. Gale had knocked them all to the ground with a blast of thunder magic. Karlach had then thrown herself straight into battle, dragging Astarion with her since Wyll had been knocked back out of range of the binding spell. They’d both ended up gouged and clawed by the shadow creatures. None of their weapons had been any use against the shadows. Because they were shadows and only corporeal when it suited them.

They might have died over that idiocy if Shadowheart hadn't used more divine magic to strike the undead specters down.

A disaster, through and through.

But she didn't have time to teach them both how to fight as a unit and the basics of psionic shielding in a single day. If on the road to the crèche they were accosted by further enemies, by Vlaakith's blessing they would be vulnerable to the bite of steel, and she could make up for the party's shortcomings.

Psionic ability was determined by innate aptitude, and as istik her allies had very little. Lae'zel had only been taught the bare basics: enough to shield herself against rending of the mind, to manipulate nearby objects, coordinate within a battle formation. There were few Gith with the aptitude to become true masters, astraan mages. There had been none in her crèche; Y'llek was a backwater squeezed between istik settlements. Any truly gifted would have been elevated to training in Ruun'khazai in the Astral Sea. But even without mind readers to secure themselves against they ought to shield their emotions, lest the istik reveal too much of their bleeding hearts.

Most of them could shield at the level of a barely-hatched yank from the coaching she had provided the night before. Wyll and Astarion were, both of them, useless.

"You can't blame him," Astarion said, as Wyll blotted sweat from his forehead and panted between pushes. "*Someone* has been making themselves comfortable in his mind for longer than we've had these parasites." His devil mistress, he meant.

"And what is your excuse?" She asked.

"Cazador," he said. The name of his sire. "A spawn is little more than a puppet when their master is there to command them. Why convince when you can compel? And I was his longer than the rest of you have been alive. Except perhaps—how old are you? Do Gith really live forever in the astral sea?"

"They live as long as they serve," she said. "Enough excuses. Try again." She would not reveal her inexperience to these outsiders, nor to Crèche Y'llek if she could help it. She was no longer an unbloodied student; she had slain the ghaik that lay dying in its crashed ship. Once this deed was acknowledged she would be regarded as Sarth, and would rise to higher honors before her mission was complete.

At last Wyll pleaded exhaustion and she, despite herself, relented. She remembered the throbbing pain that had clung to her mind when she began training, a childhood pain like teething or the ache of bones outstripping muscle growth. It had made her clumsy and distracted, landed her in the ghustil's care more times than she ought to have let it. She remembered, suddenly, nights spent curled around broken ribs and the red-hot fear that she might be culled if she reported another injury to her sa'varsh.

What were the emotions of an istik to a Githyanki, in any case? They would be her revrykal, as far as Crèche Y'llek was concerned. If a slave felt fear or anger or disgust in the presence of its betters, why ought they care?

While they had practiced, Gale had finished filtering water through the folded silk Wyll had set aside for such purposes. They ate a little more of their packed rations while Karlach showed off the ring she'd found in some skeletons off the path. Gale and Shadowheart inspected the ring and concluded it was an accessory of a thief, intended to make the wearer attract less attention. Astarion suggested that he would be the natural recipient of such a thing. They gave it to Wyll for safekeeping.

The hike back to the bridge where they had encountered the Kith'rac was agonizingly slow. Gale complained about his feeble muscles and their inadequacy for the task, requesting frequent breaks. Wyll did not complain, but slowed down increasingly as the day continued, such that she fell away from the vanguard position to flank him in case he stumbled. The vampire, walking on Wyll's other side, was hardly in better shape and likely incapable of catching Wyll if he fell. Astarion complained about everything—the poor fit of his shoes, the gradient of the climb, the condition of the road, the weather, the insects—his mouth an open door to the inane thoughts that cluttered his head.

The trail skirted past the inn; Lae'zel had to argue ferociously to stop the rest from talking themselves into stopping. Their promises of a short diversion to acquire lunch could not be trusted, and they had provisions on hand already that could be eaten while walking. At Wyll's pace she worried they wouldn't make the crèche by nightfall.

That provided a new line of conversation, as Wyll explained to Gale that most travelers and adventurers in Faerûn did not forage their own meals but instead purchased them at the many outposts and inns that lined the roads and highways. Otherwise, the forests beside the roads would end up picked clean of wildlife and edible plants as they were of dead wood and kindling.

"You are ruining all the magic of adventure," Gale complained. "You're supposed to be subsisting off berries and venison. I read some wonderful books as a child about living in the wilderness, had fantasies about running off into the woods to live with Tara for years afterwards. But I suppose the Blade of Frontiers had to visit towns regardless to get word of whatever beasties you ended up hunting."

Wyll shrugged. "Sometimes, but never for as long as I would have liked. Mizora preferred for me to keep to myself, and money was scarce those first years on the road. I've done the berries and venison diet; there's less romance in it than you're imagining. Did you know that if you eat nothing but rabbit you can eventually starve from the lack of fat?"

At the bridge, the soldier's bodies had been cleared away. Lae'zel found herself relieved. Wyll did not need that burden, and it would have upset him to see them killed so senselessly, in pursuit of the artifact they themselves carried. It was a needless risk this crèche took, to kill the locals so flagrantly. The refugees would rather flee than fight back, clearly, but when they attacked armed soldiers they might set themselves against a better prepared enemy, distracting themselves from their true purpose. It was unnecessary.

It was strange how so much in this land was built of stone, engineering intended to survive centuries, yet there were so few people using it. Perhaps there had been a great empire in these mountains once. The bridge they crossed was carefully cut stone, the river winding far below them. Shadowheart had been leading their troupe since everyone else was clustered

around Wyll, including the vampire. Lae'zel paused for a moment before crossing to ensure it was as solid as it looked and wouldn't tumble to pieces when she reached the center of the span. When Shadowheart was, regretfully, not plunged to her death, she followed.

The stone highway turned to packed dirt after a mere hour of hiking through the hills and scrublands that followed. Wyll explained to her how the woodlands were stunted by the thin soil and rocky ground, described lush green forests of the lower plains where it could feel full-dark at midday beneath their branches, a whole universe of creatures growing amidst the fertile soil made of fallen leaves. This terrain was better for visibility, avoiding ambush. She told him as much and he smiled.

"Very practical," he said. "Besides, there are some lovely trees you can only see up here, ones that are stronger than the rest and can tolerate the poor soil and lack of rain. They're choked out in the lowlands, but up here they have little competition."

He then pointed these out as they went—acerbic-scented shrubs and grey-green bushes and trees with leaves that clung even into the depths of winter. It was unnecessary information, but it distracted Wyll from the difficulty of the climb. She allowed it.

They caught the scent of woodsmoke as they neared the edge of the woods, then spotted a traveler's campsite down below. It was a pale-skinned woman in fighter's armor, a cookfire set despite the early hour. The scouting party from Crèche Y'llek had provided already that their destination was beneath the great stone fortress they had sighted to the northeast, perched on another rise of cliffs. Nevertheless, they made the decision to approach and see what information the traveler could provide.

"I should stay back," Wyll said, tugging at the improvised cape draped over his head, shading his face from the sun. "We needn't raise more questions than necessary." He'd applied another healing potion to his face in the morning before they departed, and the speckles on his skin had grown larger, like a githyanki's eye-spots covering his face. Presumably he did not reference his still-healing skin, though, but devil-touched markings and horns.

"If she asks, we will say that it is none of her concern," Lae'zel promised. "If she asks again we will gut her. You should come. You are the best of us at matters of diplomacy."

"I'm afraid she's right, Wyll," Gale said. "I must admit we were not very successful diplomats on our adventures yesterday, with you away at camp. I just don't have the knack for it—I've always understood the *theory* of conversing with strangers, but then the conversation gets out from under me, like an amateur's flying carpet."

Wyll conceded. He removed the blanket, touched his hand to his sword and regarded the middle distance for a long moment. Then the smile he used in conversation with strangers was once more upon his face and he strode down the stairs ahead of them, hailing the traveler. She responded to him in kind, free with her greetings and well-wishes for his health. That friendly patter evaporated as Lae'zel and the others were introduced to Lady Esther.

Staring at Lae'zel, Esther disparaged githyanki intelligence, explained that she had been forcefully removed from Crèche Y'llek, and that she had sought to buy one of the crèche's eggs. Even Wyll seemed beyond words at this declaration.

“And they let you leave?” Shadowheart asked. “I’m shocked they did not gut you for the insult.”

Shadowheart was right. A quick death would have been the generous response to an istik daring to trade a child of Vlaakith like chattel. Daring to threaten the sanctity of the varsh’isk, to suggest experimenting on a yank, unborn. That she still lived either indicated some corruption within Crèche Y’llek or that she could run much faster than her wrinkled face implied.

Esther then asked that *they* rob the crèche’s varsh’isk of an egg so that she might sell it for money. It was too far an insult.

Lae’zel raised her sword and declared her intentions.

Esther drew her sword in response. Wyll tried to talk her down, but there would be no forgiveness. This woman would fall here, by her sword, for her insult against Lae’zel’s people.

“I am not frightened of the lizard,” Esther said, even as she held a one-handed rapier in her wizened, elderly grip. Lae’zel had already cataloged her for weaknesses: her reach was shorter than Lae’zel’s, her blade thinner, she wore only cloth padding over her lower arms and nothing at all protecting her neck and head. She could not have lived this long and been this foolish if she had no talent at all, but there would be no contest between her and a trained githyanki warrior.

Lae’zel held her blade back in a low guard and waited. They stood between the cliff’s edge and the sheer face of the hill they had descended. She could not let herself be lured too far forward and into fire behind Esther, or so far back that she stumbled over her waiting companions. They called out for her and she held up her fist. She had no fear. She would win this fight alone.

Esther charged, blade thrust for Lae’zel’s neck. An easy parry, knocking her blade aside with Lae’zel’s superior strength.

Stepping back with confident footwork, Esther thrust forward again. Lae’zel moved to parry, and Esther revealed the second strike for a feint, pivoting on one foot to swing for the opening Lae’zel had left.

Lae’zel stumbled sideways, out of range. They met again in a strike and riposte, then another. Esther swung high for her neck. Lae’zel’s sword met it, rode up her blade in a screech of metal and, while she was distracted attempting to disengage her weapon, kicked her in the stomach.

That broke her footwork. Esther retreated and Lae’zel thrust for her neck. The woman ducked sideways, too close. She stabbed for Lae’zel’s gut, and there wasn’t space to parry and return the thrust. Lae’zel knocked her blade down, breaking the strike against the ground and binding it. Then she stomped on the fragile rapier, snapping it beneath her boot.

Her follow-through would have been to slice the woman across those unarmored forearms, but Esther retreated before her blade could bite flesh. In a word and a flurry of sparks, she hasted herself with magic and evaded Lae'zel, grabbing Wyll by the throat and forcing his head back with the broken stump of her blade.

"Enough!" Esther snarled. "Tell your wretched Gith to stop, or I'll slit your throat."

"You think I am his to order?" Lae'zel hissed. "You think I am his to command?" Esther pulled Wyll back with her, too close to the cliff's edge. She couldn't charge without risking Wyll's life, and that is'tark knew it. She snarled.

"You let him go right now!" Karlach yelled, stomping forward. Esther's blade bit into Wyll's neck. There was blood running down the steel and there was no *time*—before the ghaik parasite crippled her she would have had the psionic control to misty step to his side and unhand the woman before she could retaliate, enhanced speed or not. She couldn't count on that now; she couldn't risk it.

She didn't need to.

Wyll grabbed Esther's sword arm and snarled an invocation that sent her reeling in a flash of red magic. Then he was spinning out from her grip, pushing both hands against her chest, using that invocation again to blast her off the edge of the cliff.

The air crackled in its wake. She screamed once, short and high. The rocks below were so far that they didn't hear the impact when she hit the bottom.

Wyll leaned forward to look, hand clasped to his neck to staunch the bleeding. "She didn't have feather fall," he said. "Or she didn't cast it. Unfortunate. A repulsive woman, but I did not intend to kill her."

"She deserved a worse and more painful death, for her cowardice in breaking combat," Lae'zel agreed. "Something slow. A gut wound."

"Lae'zel, no," Wyll said.

"Well, waste not, want not," Astarion said cheerfully. "I suppose her things are ours now?" He gestured towards the large packs set by the campfire, several spears and large weapons strapped to them. Lady Esther was clearly a fool to have left superior offensive weapons in her camp and try to fight with a single rapier.

"You will stay right there," Shadowheart said. "With Karlach. You keep your hands *away* from any weapons. And away from Wyll, until I heal him."

He held up his hands and sat down on the grass. "I wasn't going to bite Wyll; I'm not a complete cretin. But fine! You can keep all the spoils to yourselves. Shame the old lady went over the cliff; I think her gambeson would have fit me better than this dreadful tent you found me."

“It’s fine, Fangs. Gear sorting is just a boring slog of ‘is it magic?’ and ‘what kind of magic?’. We can sit here and relax while they do all the hard work,” Karlach said, sitting down and stretching out on the ground. “Good hit, by the way, Wyll. You’re real fast with those eldritch blasts; I hadn’t seen a warlock fire off two that quick in quite a while.”

Wyll flushed, forgetting his wound for a moment and lifting his hand to rub awkwardly at the back of his head. Flustered to be complemented by as vivacious and handsome a warrior as Karlach. He spotted the blood on his hand, realized his mistake, pressed it back against his neck. “Ah, thank you? Never really fought alongside any other warlocks, only against them. And I’m still here, so I suppose I’m faster than some.”

They took supper at Esther’s camp since they would be delayed regardless with sorting her supplies and healing Wyll’s neck. The woman had plenty of rations to split amongst themselves, rather than further deplete their supplies.

Clearly, she had been not merely a mercenary but also a trader of some sort, carrying weapons and armor she had no use for. Most of it they would leave in a cache here by the camp to recover on their hike back after being cured. The most useful potions and scrolls were distributed amongst the party to be carried into the crèche itself. That they had allowed Esther to escape unharmed raised questions. Even a backwater crèche should have been a kill box; if the locals could not defend themselves it was even more important that they be able to.

There were three sets of magic gloves, which were distributed to Shadowheart, Gale and Karlach. Karlach’s gloves were slightly cool to the touch. Gale thought they might be intended to enhance magic wielders’ use of ice magic, but hoped they might also allow her to touch things more easily without burning them. Gale took the silver and red quarterstaff that hummed with thunder magic, declaring it a great improvement on the mundane one he had been using.

There was also a set of leather armor decorated with what appeared to be the ribs of some dead creature, reinforced with magic that enhanced dexterity and protection against falls. Wyll reluctantly accepted it. He was forced to shed his gambeson to wear it, and Astarion immediately claimed the cast-off, shucking out of the brown padded cloth armor he’d gained that morning to take Wyll’s smaller green one.

His back was going to scar unless they debrided the burn area and applied more healing potions to it. They had left a healing potion to be applied to his back the day before; it must have been given to Wyll by mistake. She told him this, and he smiled at her. “Why, it took almost twenty-four hours into our agreement before someone threatened to flay me! No thank you. Keep your skinning knives to yourself.”

She disregarded his foolishness, for they would not have time to carry out the operation that day regardless. She told him to be vigorous in his stretching, in that case, to prevent the scars from locking up his back and needing to be cut open to allow him to move. He flinched at that, then sneered that he had plenty of experience in being burned and did not need to be condescended to. She left him to Karlach to handle.

The last magical item of note was a red-jeweled amulet in the shape of a heart cupped between two hands, which again went to Wyll. “I feel like we are not equally distributing our equipment,” he said, still fidgeting with the new armor. It left part of his midsection exposed, which was terrible design in armor no matter how magical. And since only a fool would wear leather armor against their skin with no undershirt, it didn’t even have the advantage of making the wearer more sexually provocative. Astarion had suggested that leather panels could be sewn to cover the openings, which seemed mostly a defense against Wyll reclaiming the green gambeson he had taken.

“Most of us didn’t have all of our gear incinerated,” Gale pointed out. “Karlach had to steal you boots off a dead body this morning, Wyll, if you recall.”

“And since you’re still recovering, it makes sense for you to attune with as much healing and protective magic as we have available,” Shadowheart said firmly. “If we’re hit by an ambush, it’s better if we’re not all distracted worrying about you.”

“You could simply not worry about me,” Wyll said. “There’s really no need.”

Karlach patted him on the leather shoulder pad. “Sorry, soldier. Not going to happen.”

“And what am I supposed to do if we’re hit by an ambush?” Astarion complained. “Hope Wyll falls on top of me?”

Gale raised an eyebrow at him. “You were the one who wanted to be here.”

Astarion snorted. “Wanted to be *here?* Absolutely not. I wanted to not be your permanent camp prisoner, like a piece of camp furniture you murder sometimes. Which is distinct from wanting to be here.”

“If we’re forced into battle, I will stay by your side out of melee,” Wyll said. “I can cast darkness around us. My pact with Mizora grants me devil's sight; I can fight as well in arcane darkness as in daylight. I’ll cover you. We’ll carry an invisibility potion in case we need to retreat, so they can’t stab us in the backs before we can get to cover out of the field of darkness.”

“Oh.” Astarion stared at him. “Well, alright then. That’s good. I assumed you would just… well. That’s a reasonable plan. I didn’t realize any of you people did plans.”

“We literally made a plan last night!” Gale protested. “We’re in the middle of a plan right now.”

“Yes. You plan to go to a Gith stronghold, have Lae’zel *pretend* you’re her slaves, walk inside unimpeded and have them cure us of our mindflayer parasites,” Astarion recounted flatly. “I expect you’ll all be dead by sunset.”

“Crèche Y’llek is bound by the same protocols as all Gith. They *must* offer me purification and let me make good on my obligations,” Lae’zel explained. “You know nothing of my people.”

Astarion met her gaze for a moment, the red of his eyes pale imitations of the beauty of a red draa's. He looked away, hands clenching in his lap. Cowed by the intensity of her surety.

Though she could not blame him for his fear, to walk weaponless into a Githyanki crèche. Without even his fangs, which Shadowheart had stripped him of. A fit of lunacy, shared between them. Or perhaps Shadowheart's alone, with Astarion too unsure of his position in their midst to fight back against her.

He was their prisoner, by which logic they had all rights over his body and keeping. An istik revrykal might be kept cowed and broken, in the service of Vlaakith. But she needed strong allies more than servants. He did not need for further breaking; he knew their might, they knew his weakness. Building sufficient trust to form a true alliance would be nigh impossible under these conditions.

And she still had not solved the problem of how to present an undead blood drinker as requiring the services of a zaith'isk instead of a ghustil's bone saw and forceps.

His doubts seemed to settle on the others like a wet fog. Gale asked, suddenly, whether it would be better to send Lae'zel in ahead without them to be healed first and make sure of their welcome. She had to remind him that she would not be so foolish as to be parted from the artifact, nor could they know how far its protection might extend. She would not go to madness within the halls of a foreign crèche.

The others traded mutinous stares but did not make the mistake of trying to argue with her.

Chapter 10: Lae'zel

Chapter Notes

> And we are back to the Lae'zel show. Time to have a crisis of faith and a migraine, baby
>
> thanks to ZiGraves on this chapter for helping brainstorm how a zweihander vs longsword fight might work! And thanks as always to BlueBeholder's githyanki dictionary (which has moved to neocities since I last linked it: https://wanderingnork.neocities.org/githdictionary)
>
> I would like to refer the reader to the tags for this fic with a reminder that
>
> ▶ content warning

They traveled light from there on out, the crèche within sight on the far ridge and their heavy supplies hidden in a cache near the dead trader's camp.

A short walk took them to an old cable car built onto a crumbling ledge. Surely part of the construction of the old monastery, marked by age and exposure to the elements and by a sun sigil – the last of which Wyll identified as the mark of the Faerûnian god Lathander. The cables appeared in good condition despite its age, likely used by crèche patrols traveling out of the valley for the convenience. They had a brief debate on the merits of hiking the long way down into the valley, but Wyll was beginning to sway on his feet. They decided to risk the cable car.

In the courtyard of the monastery, she had her first chance to step forward and ask aid from Crèche Y'llek.

A patrol had captured three cultists, loose lips flapping about their captain's search for the weapon, as they forced their prisoners inside. Lae'zel should have stepped forward. The cultists were pathetic creatures, whinging and whining and making excuses, as if they could talk their way out of their eventual deaths. One of them bolted, and got the expected response. Lae'zel still didn't move. The patrol took their captives inside, the great doors closing behind them, and she realized that she had been holding her breath for some inane reason. An unacceptable loss of form. She breathed deeply and waved to the door.

"Well? We must follow to find the entrance to the crèche. Come along," she said.

The others regarded her warily.

"I find myself rather wishing that I wasn't the one holding the object they are looking for," Wyll said, touching his hand to the pack on his back. The artifact was bundled up in a blanket, beneath his potions and scrolls. "I don't suppose there's any other volunteers?"

Lae'zel met Shadowheart's eyes, dared her to once again try to take possession of Vlaakith's property.

"Sorry," Karlach said. "Me and luggage don't get along." She had spent most of the hike carrying both Gale and Wyll's packs, dangling off either end of a broken spear-shaft that she's balanced on her shoulders. That wouldn't be practical indoors, and packs had been redistributed. Wyll's was as light as could be managed while still carrying the essentials in case of ambush.

Nobody else volunteered. "I doubt they'll show the rest of us mercy for not being the one carrying the damned thing," Astarion said. "I'd offer, Wyll, but my poor legs are so sore from all of this dreadful hiking and from having been repeatedly murdered until I lost all of my leg muscles. You understand, don't you darling?"

"*You* are not carrying the artifact," Shadowheart hissed.

"Also that," Astarion added.

Wyll leaned against the wall, closing his eyes for a moment. A calming ritual of his; she had seen it executed several times before now. When he opened them, he had chased the fear from his face. "We go onwards, then," he said. He reached for Lae'zel's hand. She let him hold it. He squeezed his hand around hers, like an injured soldier passing some small part of his pain onto someone who could bear it better. Looking into her eyes with his one, blood-red on charcoal black, he said: "We are trusting you, Lae'zel, to carry us through this safely."

"You are," she agreed. That was a statement of fact. "I will."

"Lady Shar, forgive us our idiocy," Shadowheart muttered.

"And now the door," Lae'zel "There is no need for further delays."

Wyll and Astarion went to the great doors that marked the entrance to the crèche, Karlach trailing after them. They waited, everyone growing quieter as Astarion fumbled with the picks and began to work upon the lock. The wind whistled over the ridge, counting seconds as he began to curse quietly. Or she assumed those were curses. They were certainly unfamiliar words said in the cadence of swearing.

It went on. Astarion dropped the picks and finally the stream of curses stopped as his forehead leaned against the door. Karlach moved to hit him on the back, but held herself back from delivering punishment. "This isn't working," Karlach said.

"I can keep trying," Astarion said. Lae'zel stepped closer. His fingers were shaking, a persistent tremor as he swiped his fingers over the flagstones, gathering up the picks without opening his eyes.

"No," Lae'zel said. "We are wasting time."

"I can do it," Astarion said, voice rising higher. The desperation of a prisoner who realized they had no more information to give, no more purpose to serve. What, did he think she

would renege on their bargain the first time he failed at a given task? To what end?

“You do not need to,” Lae’zel said. “We will find another entrance.”

It was only a short walk around the courtyard before they found a broken stained glass window with sufficient space to slip through. That led them to a storage place for alcohol, which was occupied by a large number of drunken half-dressed lizard creatures. She could have killed them, easily, but perhaps the crèche was raising them for food, in this haphazard and disorderly fashion. It seemed a more logical explanation than that they let wildlife overrun the surrounds of their own crèche. Moving quietly, so as to not wake the sleeping creatures, she led the group through the room. One lizard, stumbling drunk but not yet collapsed, nearly collided with her; she pinned it down with the intensity of her stare until it moved aside.

Moving deeper into the monastery, they circled through the warren that collapse and decay had made of once-orderly rooms. All throughout, the red and yellow stained glass, the murals, the sunburst mosaics, followed them. The crèche had made no attempt to clean this place after their raid.

If they hoped to rely on obscurity to protect themselves from attack, it would seem more strategic to either cull fewer locals or leave fewer survivors of such attacks. What was the point of taking a fortress and then not rendering it defensible? It spoke, again, of disorder or weakness within the ranks of this crèche.

Their path took them down through levels darker and grimmer, hanging stagnant with the ever-present smell of decay that lingered in places like these. The skeletons of fallen raiders and defending monks had been left to decay where they fell; gone now to bleached bone and rusted armor. There was a pressure behind her breastbone that she couldn’t seem to push aside. All of Shadowheart’s slurs against her people seemed to ring out in her mind at once as they picked through the ruins of the raided temple. None of them didn’t say anything, but she could feel their judgement all the same.

Surely a Gith crèche, fighting the imminent invasion of ghaik, provided more use to the world than a retreat for clerics and academics. If their god was powerful enough to be worth worshiping, he could have prevented their slaughter.

They found the entrance to the crèche at the lowest level and within, finally, a blaze of lights. This space was at least well-kept, though the sun iconography remained, only a few attempts at Githyanki symbolism hung to cover it. There were young guards at the entryway, nervous, chattering even in the presence of outsiders. No discipline as they mentioned the presence of an inquisitor—not Voss, but a Ch’r’ai.

To their commander, Lae’zel demanded admittance. The woman looked at the rest of Lae’zel’s party, an eyebrow raised as she awaited explanation for a lone warrior with such a large number of revrykal. Lae’zel pushed her shoulders back and denied her one: a visiting warrior should never let themselves be forced into a subordinate position. She demanded access to the ghustil and purification. The commander yielded, and Lae’zel led the way inside.

The commander had not offered the direct insult of offering her an escort, but if there was anyone with psionic ability at the gate, the guards throughout the crèche would be watching for them momentarily.

Straight ahead from the entryway, she could see a classroom, set down into an amphitheater. The class was less than ten yanki, a mix of ages so wide as to be near useless for combat training. This place was small, pathetically so. It was amazing they managed to function.

The sa'varsh was disciplining one of the students as they passed and Wyll lurched for the doorway. Lae'zel had to force him back with a snarl. "You are my revrykal," she reminded him, speaking more harshly than she would otherwise for the benefit of the watching guards, "you do not interfere in the business of githyanki."

She would not risk their conditional passage in this place for Wyll's need to throw himself in front of every sword. He had play-fought with the tieflings in the Grove when they visited and had clearly confused that with actual training. She explained that a weak student needed to be disciplined, lest they contaminate the ranks with their weakness and require more culling later.

In the hall they passed more trainees who spoke with such weakness, revealing that the captain and the Ch'r'ai inquisitor were in conflict over whether the search for the artifact or the destruction of the ghaik-poisoned cult was more urgent. They spoke of the artifact only as a weapon. She could see no use for it as such, unless it harbored some powers that required a mage's gift to use. It was troubling that there was conflict between the captain and a ch'r'ai. It was more troubling that the crèche's students would report on such a conflict to outsiders.

Perhaps the sa'varsh here was ineffective in his discipline.

They would need to redirect the ch'r'ai in order to free the captain to act against the cult. But that was a challenge which would have to wait until after she was cured.

They passed a portrait of Vlaakith on the wall on their way to the ghustil's quarters. Lae'zel met her queen's gaze with her head held high. Her mind was clear; there was no disloyalty in her heart. Her shields were stronger than any psionic talent that might be waiting in this place. She did not let them linger, pushing past the infirmary and the children's quarters, cluttered with laughter and magehand games, to her destination.

The zaith'isk.

The pain in the center of her chest finally loosened. For all the weaknesses of this crèche, they still had access to purification.

The zaith'isk stood in a place of honor on a raised pedestal, as it deserved. Light spilled down through the window behind it like a marker of something holy. She stepped towards it, drawn by the need to finally be pure. To have this *thing* inside of her purged, to be clean again. She had never been allowed the privilege of seeing one before; her own crèche had kept their zaith'isk in a room inaccessible to common soldiers.

Black metal entwined with organic muscle and sinew; throbbing and oozing. A zaith'isk was grown before it was built; ghaik organics cloned and cultivated for their resonance with the parasites, harnessed by gith mechanisms and forced into service for the will of Vlaakith. A triumph of Gith over Ghaik. It hinged down over the patient's seat in the shape of an open maw with fangs like a vampire. Metal encircled the flesh above those jaws like a crown.

Karlach closed the door behind her.

"What now?" The ghustil demanded, not turning away from her workbench at the noise. Lae'zel pulled her attention away from her salvation to assess the last obstacle separating her from it. The ghustil was leaning over a ghaik parasite specimen suspended in a viewing apparatus. The visible storage in the room was all specimens—an appalling collection of squirming and rotting parasites squeezed between equipment. There were two ragged bedrolls on the floor beside the ghustil's desk. That and her disorderly hair suggested she was an obsessive who slept in the morbid company of her research, her healer's tattoos an afterthought. Lae'zel hated her on sight.

Still, she had no way of operating the zaith'isk without her. She informed the ghustil that she was in need of healing and that there was no time for her to delay with questions and speculation—the tenth day grew ever closer, for all that she hadn't been able to detect any symptoms yet.

The ghustil's interest in Lae'zel's defilement was unseemly. Almost heretical. She was so fascinated that she seemed to ignore the presence of the others entirely. A gith grew used to ignoring the presence of their lessers; the revrykal in Lae'zel's crèche had always been below her notice unless they were serving her directly. Convenient now for her purpose in getting into the zaith'isk without answering any further questions, but it made her bristle to see her allies treated like lowly service slaves.

"My revrykal will also require purification," she demanded.

"There are more of them?" the ghustil asked greedily. "Implanted around the same time? Delayed symptoms, even across species? Yes, clearly, we must extract the specimens…but as a child of Vlaakith, clearly you will take the first honor."

"Of course," Lae'zel agreed.

The others watched as she climbed into the seat of the zaith'isk. Their faces were as poorly masked as their minds, all in fearful awe of the zaith'isk…except Astarion, who was watching with avaricious delight. It was wet against her legs where they were not covered by armor, like laying down into the mouth of a carnivore. A shudder built up within her, an instinctive revulsion to the ghaik perversion that was necessary to power the machine.

Ghustil Stornugoss commanded her to focus upon the parasite, in order to direct the energy of the zaith'isk to it for annihilation. She had let it hide from her, content to pretend it was not there. As her control sagged and fell, she worried she would not be able to find it at all. That her weakness might deny her purification.

Then the Zaith'isk's beam powered on, a searing white that lit the capillaries in her closed eyelids into spiderwebs across her vision. The parasite shuddered and she threw herself at it. Grappled it, clung to the repulsive, squirming mass of it. Her skin felt warn, then hot beneath the Zaith'isk's light, and then it lit through to her mind.

The parasite burned and she burned with it.

Lae'zel screamed. Her mind flinched, tried to untangle from the parasite she had been bid to hold as they were burned as one.

She remembered, suddenly, the shame of her first flogging. How she had cried, arms flailing for her cousins as the sa'varsh hauled her to the post. How she had wanted, desperately, shamefully, for someone to step between her and her punishment. She hadn't realized the mercy of the whip was given to her to protect her from culling. She had been too young to understand, and so she had cried out for someone to protect her.

She was no yank, to scream for mercy under a sa'varsh's whip. But still she screamed, futile and wordless. Some part of her mind thrashed like a cornered animal, searching for escape even as she held herself against the chair. A sense of doom, inescapable, began to squeeze at her heart. There were voices beyond her but there was no sound louder than the roar of the zaith'isk, the sound of her own screams.

The pain was like sinking into the lava of Avernus, melting into formless agony, like the lighting of Dis shuddering through her from spine to fingertips. The parasite within her mind's grasp became distant as she felt herself consumed.

This wasn't how it was supposed to be. She had been promised purification. She had been promised salvation. Why was she now denied succor, which was the right of every loyal gith?

The world seemed to stretch out before her, like a tunnel up to the Astral Plane. Anguish clung to the air, fragments of voices, of shadows of Githyanki. Dying, like her, within grasp of salvation.

Voices speaking an unfamiliar tongue called out to her, told her to save herself, purity be damned. But she couldn't answer. Couldn't move except to seize, back arching as her muscles locked and crackled. The world grew brighter, that tunnel condensing to a silver thread that gleamed like polished steel.

And then the thread snapped.

The light went out. The roar of the Zaith'isk ceased and, while she could feel herself still screaming, there was no noise at all. Her armor clattered silently against the seat, contractions slowing as the pressure within her faded.

The parasite still lived, squirming within her hold. From it, through it, she could hear the voices again, feel the touch of unfamiliar emotions that felt like aching. Like the feeling of a cousin, strong arms that had held you and promised you a future, missing from your bed after the culling. It took her a moment to resolve the voices into words, the words into her name.

She opened her eyes.

The Ghustil was upside down, wrapped in coarse rope that held her dangling off the floor. Blood dripped from her temple and there was a bruise already darkening around her eye. The others stood around her, panting in the—ah—magical silence as if from a hard fight.

She had been saved.

She forced herself up onto one elbow, then slid down out of the zaith'isk onto her knees. Blood splattered onto the polished steel of her thigh guards. When she lifted her hand to check, there was blood running freely from her nose, oozing from the corner of her eyes like tears. She spat blood onto the ground and tried again to rise.

A healing potion was pushed into her hand, still hot from the touch of Karlach's skin. Lae'zel drank it, then the next. The familiar acidic tang washed away the bile and blood in her throat. At last, she could stumble onto her feet. Gale and Shadowheart—who looked not nearly as smug as she ought at Lae'zel's near-death—helped her off the plinth and out of the zone of silence. Wyll hung back, hand on the vampire's shoulder as Astarion looked greedily at the blood splashed on her armor.

"The ghustil is corrupted," Lae'zel said. "You did well to subdue her. She must be interrogated to determine how she has defiled the zaith'isk."

"A *thank you* would be in order," Shadowheart said. "That damn machine was killing you and you wouldn't get up."

"Shadowheart, peace," Wyll said. "Lae'zel, are you alright? We could feel it—"

Oh. Somehow in her desperation, that damned parasite had reached out and repeated the trick it had during Wyll's punishment. Shared her agony, her thoughts, her shame with all of her companions. That was why they had stopped the Ghustil—in order to sever themselves from her torment.

"I will not be a burden," she said. "I am battle-worthy." She ignored the lightness inside of her, like something had been scraped away by the zaith'isk's beam. "Thank you for your aid. We must, quickly, report the ghustil's treachery. The zaith'isk can yet be repaired; they must send for an engineer to have her sabotage undone."

"It wasn't sabotaged. It was always meant to do that!" Shadowheart snarled. "The visitor from our dreams last night told us. Its whole purpose is killing Githyanki who've become infected. And now we have to escape this damned place before someone kills *us* for attacking their healer or walking around with illithid parasites."

"I am with Shadowheart on this," Gale said. "I do not think they will take kindly to a group of outsiders attacking one of their own, no matter how compelling our reasoning."

"The voice is a ghaik, lying to keep us from purification! You must not believe its deceits," she told them.

They would not listen to her. No matter. She *must* report this; the zaith'isk must be fixed while there was still time for her purification. She abandoned persuasion, pushing through them towards the door. On her way past, she grabbed Astarion by the collar of his gambeson and dragged him along with her. The binding would force Karlach and Wyll along after him. Gale and Shadowheart would realize quickly that an obedient revrykal was tolerated in the presence of their gith master where a lone istik was not. They would follow. And if they had brains in their heads, they would not argue in the hearing of Crèche Y'llek.

Astarion staggered after her, hands clinging to her gripping arm. Voices were pounding in her head again, and she forced her shields back into place. She had no interest in their arguments.

One of the soldiers in the infirmary whistled at her, pointing and laughing at her unruly group of revrykal. She was attracting too much attention. She stopped. Released Astarion. "Follow or die," she ordered him, then continued walking.

The others followed. They did not stop attempting to force their way into her mind, but they had no skill at it. She understood that they feared the other githyanki. That if they didn't, they might bolt with the artifact. But there was nothing more important than this. She would save them, and all debts would be repaid.

She ordered the location of the ch'r'ai inquisitor from one of the watching guards and was directed to the captain's quarters.

From the hallway she could hear the inquisitor castigate the kith'rak for her failures to retrieve the artifact. The captain's own soldiers paused before obeying her commands to recommence patrols until those orders were endorsed by the inquisitor as well. A sign of sickening weakness.

She stood to the side as the soldiers hurried out; watched the inquisitor's back retreat through the doorway, a psionic barrier falling into place behind him as the captain locked it.

The captain's chambers were as bleak as the rest of the crèche, never fully converted for her use. Empty bookshelves had never been filled and storage crates filled the corners of the room. Two wolves sat by the fire, gnawing on the corpses of the cultists they had seen earlier. Behind her, Shadowheart hissed, stepping behind Karlach like a shield.

Lae'zel ignored her. She stepped up to the kith'rak and demanded an audience with the inquisitor. The captain's gaze was rigid with fury as she denied her, called her worthless, vin'iisk. Lae'zel realized her mistake, to give orders to a captain already burning from the disrespect of her own soldiers. Even if the captain was not also corrupt, she must seem as such if Lae'zel finds corruption within her crèche. She must deny it.

Instead, Lae'zel turns the conversation. She knows the kith'rak wants to focus on the ghaik threat, not the hunt for the artifact. She asks why she does not, why she allows ghaik-influenced cultists to swarm outside her crèche.

Because of the ch'r'ai inquisitor and his entourage, the captain tells her. She asked Tu'narath for reinforcements to fight the cult and instead they sent an inquisition.

Surely this cannot be the will of Vlaakith. Surely this artifact cannot be as important as their fight against the ghaik, Lae'zel tells her, leads her. The captain agrees, of course. But the inquisitor will allow her to do nothing until the weapon is found.

"I have seen this weapon," Lae'zel says. The others stiffen; their pounding on the edges of her mind grows even louder. She ignores them. "It is held by the leaders of the cultists who hide within the ruined temple, across the hills to the east."

The Kith'rak crossed her arms. "I have interrogated many of their vin'iisk. They are too weak to have held out against torture. They claim their masters also seek the weapon."

"Their masters are ghaik-touched," Lae'zel said. "Liars. They hide their treasures from their own soldiers because there is no true loyalty within their ranks. If we are to recover the weapon, we must raid the cultist encampment."

The captain's eyes gleamed. "The Ch'r'ai would need to be convinced to send reinforcements. But if you have seen this weapon where you claim…he must agree to let us attack. And if the weapon is not found within this encampment, that must mean they have sent it to their larger base. To Moonrise Towers, within the Shadowlands."

"Of course, Kith'rac," Lae'zel said. "I will speak to the Ch'r'ai, as you request. Ch'mar, zal'a Vlaakith."

The captain spoke the oath of loyalty, and they clasped hands. The captain believed Lae'zel a conspirator, ready to subvert the will of the inquisition in order to attack the ghaik. And that she would gladly do, but she must first report the ghustil's treachery and secure her purification.

The captain used the psionic crystal to let them into the passageway beyond her chamber. It was another great stoneworking, built of much magic or many lifetimes of labor, a bridge across a natural cavern. The railings along its edges had begun to crumble, but the massive support towers on either side, inset with black glass windows, still stood. The sun was setting somewhere overhead, the light that streamed through the openings above splashing red against the glass and stone.

"Lae'zel, please stop," Wyll said as they stepped out onto the bridge. "Stop and think for a moment."

"We cannot go back," Lae'zel said. Across the bridge there was an immense black-iron doorway. The inquisitor must have taken the chamber beyond as his workspace. "The captain will not allow us to pass back without the inquisitor's blessing."

"The inquisitor cares only of finding the artifact," Wyll said. *The artifact we carry,* went unsaid. "The captain said so herself. Why would he care about the zaith'isk?"

Lae'zel laughed. "Why would Vlaakith's faithful care about a traitor subverting her instruments, killing her people? It is their duty. Rooting out traitors is the highest cause of an inquisition."

“And what would you call a person who held their artifact in secret?” Shadowheart asked.

“Be silent, *istik*,” Lae’zel snarled.

She pulled open the iron door at the end of the bridge. Another large chamber lay beyond, an inverted stage with a circular altar at its base, surrounded by stairs. The inquisitor waited in the center of the room with two of his robe-clad ardents. Two warriors guarded the entryway and stepped into place to block her passage.

“You may allow her through,” the inquisitor said. “Lae’zel of Crèche K’llir, be welcome here.”

She got her first proper look at the inquisitor as the warriors stepped aside to allow them passage. He was old, without scars or injury, still in full armor. His eyes gleamed within the deep hollows of his face, reminding her of the undead creature that had offered Wyll an alliance after their visit to his crypt. He wielded a two-hander greatsword, a weapon of a man who never needed travel without a minion to carry his weapon for him.

The others followed her down to him. She was surprised they had not turned tail and fled. Perhaps they could still play the part of loyal revrykal, though she suspected the inquisitor had more psionic ability than they would be able to shield their emotions against. Hopefully he read only a servant’s natural fear and anger in their minds. For now, he seemed to have only eyes for Lae’zel.

“My ardents tell me that you survived the crash of that ghaik ship,” the inquisitor said. “Your name was carried to me by the patrol that met with Kith’rac Voss. I am Ch’r’ai W’wargaz. Tell me, Lae’zel: why have you sought out my council?”

“Ch’r’ai, there is treachery within this Crèche. I must report that the ghustil, Stornugoss, has subverted the zaith’isk within her keeping. I do not know if this is conspiracy, or if she alone is driven by madness. But the zaith’isk has been perverted to kill Githyanki, so that she might extract their parasites for further study. She has many of them within her keeping. I do not know how many loyal soldiers she has already killed.”

“A serious charge,” W’wargaz said, nodding. “And how did you come to know this, Lae’zel of Crèche K’llir?”

Lae’zel choked. She didn’t—

She couldn’t defy an order to speak, not from an inquisitor. And he knew that she had survived the crash, he must also already know what she was.

“I am infected,” she said. “Upon the ghaik ship, a parasite was forced within me. I have shown no symptoms. There is still time for purification, if a mlar from the capital can be sent to repair the zaith’isk—”

“The zaith’isk is not broken.” W’wargaz said. “It serves its purpose. The details of each encounter with the ghaik hold strategic importance. The zaith’isk allows us to scavenge these memories from the walking dead, make use of their sacrifice. For what use would Vlaakith

have in a child corrupted by the ghaik? Even if the parasite could be purged, they would never be unsullied. Only Vlaakith could purify one of the walking dead from this corruption, and she would only extend such mercy to a soldier whose actions had elevated them above all others. If, for instance, they were to provide her the weapon of her greatest desiring."

He knew.

The parasite twisted in her skull even as her legs begged her to let her fall to her knees and beg for mercy. The inquisitor knew. Because if he knew she was on the ship, he knew she was infected. And if she was infected and still came to the crèche instead of being forced into servitude within the cult encampment, she must be protected by the artifact. He knew what power it wrought and from that he knew she must have it.

A part of her screamed in anger, that he would claim the zaith'isk a lie. If there was no cure and every infected must die, then they must die. But to promise deliverance and then kill them? It was wrong. Unnecessary. Githyanki were loyal: they would follow protocol even into death, there was no need for such—cruelty.

But the larger part of her realized it mattered not. All of her lies, her excuses. She had refused to follow orders, withheld the relic her Queen demanded in pursuit of her own salvation.

It was over.

She explained that the artifact was the only thing protecting her from the influence of the cult. The inquisitor responded that this power, the power that protected her, was the same power her Queen would turn upon the ghaik.

He told her that the ghaik had set their roots in this plane, the beginning of their Grand Design to retake control over all people, everywhere. That there would be no dislodging them except by complete annihilation. For which their queen required Lae'zel surrender the weapon. "For what matters more, Lae'zel?" W'wargaz asked calmly. "Your life or the orders of your Queen? Would you not die for her? Would you not be destroyed for her, if she wished it?"

Lae'zel could not force the words from her mouth. Behind her, the ardents forced her companions to their knees in a wave of psionic energy. Lae'zel stumbled to them, half blind with the tears filling her eyes. She had—she'd been loyal. She was loyal. She had only wanted the chance to continue serving Vlaakith, a little more time. One more chance to prove herself.

"Lae'zel, don't," Karlach said, as she opened the bag that Wyll carried and pulled the artifact from within.

"You've doomed us all," Shadowheart hissed.

"I have no choice," Lae'zel told them. They must hate her now, hate her as all istik hated githyanki. She could not apologize for obeying the orders of her Queen.

They were not hers to grieve.

Taking the artifact in her hands—so small to have caused such fuss, it hardly resembled a weapon at all—she set it upon the altar at the Inquisitor's direction. The circular altar was surrounded by red psionic crystals, inscribed with runes to weave magic. A planecaster. She did not ask what would happen next.

There was no time. The moment the artifact touched the ground within the planecaster, a figure rose up within it in a blaze of light. Vlaakith. Mighty in stature, wreathed in holy motes of light, her eyes gleaming with power as she took the artifact within her hands. Her queen looked down upon her and Lae'zel felt her broken heart quail.

She fell to her knees. *Vlaakith gha'g shkath zai* fell from her lips, echoing the praise of the inquisitor and his ardents. The world felt wretched and hollow, her queen seeing her now at this moment of dishonor and despair.

"My child," Vlaakith spoke. "My Lae'zel. You carry that which is mine."

"My queen," Lae'zel replied, not daring to look away. "You know me?"

But of course, a foolish question. Why would Vlaakith not know all of her children? She smiled as she recounted Lae'zel's adolescent glories, as if she did not now kneel before her, disgraced. "You seek purity," Vlaakith spoke. "If you please me, child, I may yet grant it."

Lae'zel shuddered. She would not cry in front of the Deathless Queen, even to be offered an honor in place of execution. "Anything, my Queen. I am yours to command."

Vlaakith smiled again, her teeth as sharp as daggers. Lae'zel listened in rapt attention as she explained her mission: the weapon was called the astral prism. Within it lay great power. But there was a creature within the prism, a usurper, stealing that power for its own. It must die to render the prism unto Vlaakith. And this, she asked of Lae'zel, to show herself worthy of purification. Of *ascension*.

The inquisitor stepped forward and offered to go within the prism himself. Vlaakith ignored him, like a speck of dust upon her shoe, all of her tremendous attention upon Lae'zel. "Well, my child?" She asked.

"I am yours to use as you see fit, my Queen," Lae'zel promised. "I ask only"—she should not, she should not risk the fragile benevolence of her queen when she had come so close to destruction—"that you consider purifying my allies. They, too, will stand against the Illithid Empire, if given the chance."

Vlaakith considered her. "You would give me orders, Lae'zel?"

"No, no—I swear I would not. Only ask, that you might consider," she said. The fear was running cold through her blood, such that her hands were near numb.

"Sentiment is not for creatures such as we, Lae'zel," Vlaakith spoke. "But a loyal servant might choose her own attendants. When this agent of the Grand Design is dead, I might consider your request."

Lae'zel could hardly speak to swear again her loyalty and her gratitude before Vlaakith's image faded from the planecaster, leaving only the astral prism floating in her wake. To attend to her task, she must go within.

Lae'zel reached out and touched the bare metal and the plates split apart, circling the prism as the light from within it grew greater and greater. The air pulled on her and she stumbled into the light.

The portal left her in the place from her dream. A rocky wasteland, the wreckage of some long-ago war within the purple glow of the astral sea. Stripped bones of a huge skeleton floating off to the side of the rock beneath her feet, decked in rings and wearing a helmet of gleaming red. Some dead god or giant.

Above her, stars gleaming against the shimmering galaxies. The world was quiet, in the way she hadn't heard since landing on the buzzing, living surface of Faerûn.

Dead Gith soldiers lay upon the ground, gone pale in death but still whole. It was impossible to say how long they might have lain there, for bodies remained in the Astral Sea unless they were consumed. Had these soldiers been set to her same task and failed?

Ahead of her, there was a circular gateway, blocked by a shimmering wall of purple light. From beyond it, she heard the voice from her dreams again. The voice of her cousin, Sarul, who had been dead half her lifetime, calling her to step through the gateway and speak with her.

She did, and did not let her fury at the usurper wearing Sarul's face show yet. An obvious ploy, to play to sentiment by taking the form of someone Lae'zel had loved, someone who had trusted her. But she had killed Sarul once already. There was no grief to be had in a stranger wearing her shape.

"Perhaps it was a mistake to protect you," the Illithid agent said, "when you are so eager to agree to murder me at your Queen's request. But of course, this is what she made of you," she said, opening her arms wide.

"You have done nothing to protect me," Lae'zel told them. "It is the prism that holds power."

"This place? Oh, no, Lae'zel, the power is not in the object or the prison folded inside of it. The power comes from *me*. I suppose Vlaakith thinks she can wring it from my corpse once your work is done…she does grow desperate."

"Gith do not keep prisoners," Lae'zel sneered.

"No, they don't, do they? So why would your Queen have needed a prison built and folded out of spacetime, unless to hold something more important than a person? *A secret.* A secret that could topple her empire—the power to stop and control an Elder Brain."

"You lie."

“She told you I would,” the creature that wore Sarul’s face said. “But know this—the Undying Queen is desperate. She will not suffer you to live after you have seen me, spoken to me, for fear I might have revealed this secret. Even now, I see her speak to her inquisitor, ordering him to kill you once you step outside this place.”

“You *lie!*”

“I thought you might be able to break away from your Queen’s indoctrination,” they said. “But I suppose some people must do everything the hard way. Come then. Obey her orders like the thrall that you are. At least I’ll have the satisfaction that you’ll see sweet, trusting Sarul die a second time.”

Lae’zel drew her sword. If the creature would goad her into it, let them die smiling. She went for the heart.

When Sarul had died, she had cried. It had been, above all, messy. No dignity in it, as she’d clung to Lae’zel’s shoulders as if she hadn’t been the one to put the knife in her gut. This time, the creature simply touched the blade and shook their head in disapproval.

Then they vanished into mist. A trick, an illusion.

After a moment’s pause, they reappeared, back on their feet, robes whole again. “No good deed goes unpunished, I suppose,” they said. “Are you done?”

Lae’zel tried again. She could not go home to her queen and say she had been made a fool of. Again the creature shimmered and vanished after her blade cut through them and reappeared unharmed.

“You cannot kill me, Lae’zel,” they said. “Your queen has set you an impossible task. Surely you wondered why she asked this of you—disgraced, contaminated—instead of killing me herself? She cannot. She does not know how. But she would rather kill a thousand loyal soldiers attempting to destroy me than allow me to continue to exist, knowing the secret that she pretends to—the secret of how mother Gith crushed the Illithid empire.”

And then the creature vanished again, the voice whispering lies in her ears once again, that Lae’zel would be killed as soon as she left the portal.

In one respect, the creature had spoken true—she could not kill a being of magic on her own. She needed an ally with truesight, who could locate their real form, untangle any magical defenses. She would need her allies to fight it. Setting aside the creature’s lies, she resolved to return to the inquisitor, demand aid and return a second time to carry out Vlaakith’s order properly.

On the boundary of the portal, though, she allowed herself one moment of doubt. This place was a portion of the Astral Sea. How could it, in itself, hold power? It must have been made for safekeeping something or someone that held that power. And why would Vlaakith need to go to such lengths to contain or hide anything? What could she not simply hold in her hand and trust her empire to defend?

But it was not her place to question the Undying Queen. Holding her head high and her sword to her shoulder, she stepped out of the portal, into the room beyond.

“Ch’r’ai W’wargaz, I—”

“Remain silent!” W’wargaz said, voice cold steel. His sword was in his hands, the tip resting against the ground. “By command of Vlaakith, you are named Hshar’lak. Kneel for execution beside your istik playthings, you ghaik wretch.”

As the creature in the prism had claimed would happen.

“I am loyal,” she swore. “Summon Vlaakith and—”

“You are no longer Gith! You do not give orders, hshar'lak. Kneel, or I will force you to your knees!”

She was loyal. She would not bow to a sentence based on lies. Lae’zel raised her sword to a high guard and snarled her defiance. The inquisitor kicked the tip of his sword, setting it arcing up into the air as he strode forward—

And Karlach bellowed: “Now!”

Wyll and Gale both yelled incantations, voices overlapping. There was the crackle of Wyll’s eldritch fire behind her and the ardents screamed as they were thrown back. Then three beams of white magic hit W’wargaz, knocking him off balance.

Lae’zel would not waste their gift. The greatest strength of the inquisitor’s sword was in its reach. The greatest strength of hers was in her greater maneuverability, her ability to rapidly parry strikes and bind his weapon if she could get within his guard and stay there. She charged forwards, bringing her sword down to slice at his unguarded midsection in the seam of his armor.

He whirled his greatsword to the left, knocking her sword away. She pivoted around the blade, catching her sword against his and grinding them together. While he was pinned, she slammed her forehead into his nose.

Behind her, Karlach was roaring. Her axe sang as it struck steel. There was a flash of light between Shadowheart’s hand and Wyll’s shoulder as she positioned herself in front of their most vulnerable party member. Astarion crouched by his side, weaponless, useless -

W’wargaz misty stepped out from her hold. She was already spinning to meet him as he reappeared behind her. Not fast enough. His blade bit into her arm below her shoulder-guard. Her hand spasmed and she nearly dropped her blade.

She retreated as W’wargaz advanced, blade spinning in constant rotation, covering him from attack and making it impossible to advance inside his guard.

There was a flash of psychic fire as one of the ardents targeted Wyll. He staggered, but it was Shadowheart who screamed, going down to one knee. The second ardent stepped up to grab

her by the braid and lanced a second flare into her brain. Karlach tackled them, and there was no time to see what happened as she parried each of W'wargaz's strikes.

She attempted to surge into a thrust, but was forced to sidestep to avoid his blade. On each parry she was reminded how much more momentum his blade carried, her blood-streaked arm shaking. She would not be able to work him to exhaustion.

There was a flurry of arrows that flew past her shoulder, and she nearly missed her footing. Past the Inquisitor's shoulder, she saw Astarion push himself in front of Wyll and take two bolts to the chest. Astarion staggered and fell back against Wyll. "Use the damned plan!" he wheezed. "Wyll! Darkness, now!"

"Umbrae!" Wyll shouted back, and a cloud of pure black rose from the floor to fill half the battlefield.

Lae'zel just needed a moment to make her strike count. She just needed a moment. Tuning out everything except the motion of W'wargaz's blade as it spun over his shoulder, arced down to cross his body and rise again, she muttered the one incantation she could trust would work.

Then she jammed her magehand against his blade, knocking it aside. She stepped close and thrust her sword into his gut.

But he was already vanishing out from under her with another misty step. Lae'zel spun to locate him, ducking beneath a crossbow bolt, knocking a second aside. Wyll's magic blasted out from the cloud of darkness, knocking the bowman down. She saw W'wargaz up on the far platform.

And then she saw the warrior misty-step behind Karlach and drive their shortsword through her throat.

Karlach dropped her axe as she grabbed for the warrior's hands, to try and hold the blade. The ardent she had been beating back threw a lance of psychic fire at her as the warrior's blade cleaved out through the front of her throat.

She didn't scream. Wyll did.

Everything seemed to still for a moment. The infernal fire roared up to the ceiling as her body hit the floor in what felt like a primal screech.

And then it was over and Karlach was dead, the fire guttered.

Lae'zel screamed back into the darkness and threw herself into a misty step, letting her rage carry her up to the platform above despite how the magic threatened to buck out from under her. She swung for W'wargaz—

And he grabbed hold of her mind and crushed it.

Everything smeared, like someone had shoved claws into her eyes and raked them across her field of vision. Agony twisted itself through her nerves, nausea rushing up to meet her as her

knees hit the ground. There was screaming, maybe, but she couldn't hear anything over the all-consuming shriek of static that lanced through her ears.

When he was through ripping out pieces of her mind, W'wargaz swung for her neck again.

She wouldn't die like this. Lae'zel rolled out from under his swing, spitting bile. He stepped too close, and she surged upwards, driving her sword up towards his groin.

He kicked her off the platform.

She hit the tilted stone floor, breath leaving her as her armor was forced into her back. Her head was ringing, the sound of bells. Bells. She hadn't let go of her sword, but her hand wouldn't tighten around the grip, just lay limp against the force of her commands.

She rolled over. Forced her other hand, slick with blood, to take up the sword. Got herself to one knee.

Ahead of her, she could see Shadowheart and Gale, smeared like oil. Gale was standing in front of the cleric, blasting at the ardents with firebolts as she lay on the ground, shuddering. One ardent clipped Gale with a psychic rend and he staggered.

The warrior who had killed Karlach stepped forward and put his sword through Gale's gut. The mage armor he had cast on himself sparked, failed, as the warrior ripped his sword up through Gale's chest. He fell. Shadowheart crawled towards him, reaching out with hands lit blue. The ardent stepped over Gale and kicked her in the face. Shadowheart moaned.

"Get up!" Lae'zel ordered her, even as she struggled to get her own feet beneath her. Shadowheart's head turned and their eyes met for one terrified moment. Then the ardent shoved her face to the ground, hand lit with psychic energy. Shadowheart wailed like an animal in pain, then gurgled, then stilled.

Dead.

They were all dead.

The cloud of darkness that had concealed Wyll was gone, but she couldn't see his body through the oil smear of her vision. His plan had been to use invisibility to escape, if all went bad. If all the rest of them fell, he still could not die. She would not see him back in the hells, no matter the cost.

"Wyll, run!" She yelled. Maybe he was already gone. Maybe he and the vampire were gone, and safe. "That is an order! Retreat!"

She heard the inquisitor's footsteps and she staggered around, left leg dragging.

"Whoever are you talking to?" he asked. "Wyll, is it? I suppose we'll have to find him, once we've finished feeding the rest of your corpses to the captain's little pets. But first. Hshar'lak. I promised you your execution."

His sword swung down towards her. She tried to parry, but the blade slipped from her blood-slick hands. His blade clipped her temple and she fell again. Her sword clattered against the ground, the bells in her head echoing again in answer.

She grabbed for it. Never let go of your weapon. Not until it is too broken to use, or you are too broken to fight.

A booted foot came down on her fingers. Once, then twice. The pain was beginning to run together, smearing like her vision. Hands twisted in her braids and hauled her back onto her knees. The inquisitor laughed, and set her own sword to her neck. The blade was nicked and chipped. She would have to take a grindstone to it again.

She tried to order Wyll to run, one more time, but the words just wouldn't come.

Her final thought as her blade met her neck was that she hoped Wyll still lived. And that, if Astarion did, he wasn't gloating.

Chapter 11: Astarion

Chapter Notes

Hello again. It's been (checks watch) a hot minute. In the time since I last updated this fic I have written just about 120,000 words of various Wyllstarion AUs, as I was lured by the siren song of whump. Which is to say that, with this chapter up before the close of 2024 I can officially say I published 200,000 words on ao3 this year 🥂

I hope some of you are still around! It's been half a year and I'm sure some folks have moved on to other fandoms but I am still happily chugging away here. I will get to comments from the last chapter! I wanted to get this up first to meet my arbitrary 2024 deadline and have some festivities to get to, so that might not be til tomorrow morning.

So anyway:

Last time on No Good End In View... Everyone else just died fighting the inquisitor in the Gith Creche, which was a bad idea at level 4. Wyll (who was in a bad way after being burnt alive by Mizora) and Astarion (their vampire prisoner who's magically handcuffed to Wyll) escaped in the chaos and are now hiding within the creche.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It wasn't how things were supposed to go.

He hadn't been *thinking*; he could never think further than a step ahead of himself. All he'd known was that he couldn't stand being tied up in their camp like some sort of livestock one second longer. That they'd never let him go, so following them was his best chance at pretending he had some measure of freedom.

And he'd known they were being stupid, following Lae'zel into her den of murderous cousins while carrying a stolen Gith artifact. And he'd known that wasn't necessarily the survivable type of stupid. The odds of someone getting beheaded and then fed to a giant wolf seemed greater by the minute the deeper they went.

But he didn't think about the fact that he was chained to Wyll, folk-hero, monster-slayer, self-sacrificing idiot. That for him to escape, he'd need Wyll to escape. He'd need Wyll to actually follow through on the plan he'd made and *abandon the rest of them to die*.

Faced with insurmountable odds and inevitable defeat, the Blade would rather go down in an idiotic last stand than leave anyone behind. When it was time to follow through, he froze up.

Somehow escaping fell to *Astarion.*

He got in front of Wyll so the human wouldn't be spitted on an arrow. He screamed at him until he raised a cloud of darkness to hide in. He stole a pack and the damned artifact that was apparently keeping them from squidding out. He located a potion of invisibility by feel and drank it.

He had to force Wyll's body out of the room, hand clamped over his mouth to stop him from trying to yell an invocation and give away their position. It wouldn't have done any good anyway. It would only have gotten them caught.

They staggered away from the screaming in staccato jerks: him pulling forwards, Wyll tugging backwards.

Sometimes a mark would realize something was wrong before Cazador came to take them away. Maybe they could smell blood in the stale air of the boudoir. Maybe when they touched his skin the lack of pulse triggered some flight response deep in their skulls. Maybe they just knew. But he would have to hold them down as they realized they were going to die and fought with every life-clinging animal instinct in them to rip themselves free.

It wasn't like that. He was saving Wyll.

If Astarion hadn't spotted the hidden door and realized the bridge support columns were hollow on their way in, he wasn't sure where they would have gone. Over the edge into the abyss? The way through the captain's chamber was blocked by a forceshield, and he didn't know who had the key.

He was hoping, really fucking hoping, that the Gith were as uninterested in the defenses built by the monastery's original inhabitants as they seemed. And that the stone wall would make them harder for the mages to locate.

The hollow space inside the column was clearly intended for one person. A ladder set into the stone ran upwards to a narrow wooden archer's perch level with the blackened glass windows, then up further still. To the monastery above, if the gods were through kicking him today.

Once the door was closed behind them, Wyll seemed to briefly regain some semblance of life. He managed the ladder up to the wooden platform himself. Astarion followed him up, squeezed himself into the narrow space across from him.

They were pressed together like bones in an ossuary, darkness so deep that all color turned to grey in his vision. The cold stone wall dug into his shoulder as he tried to angle himself so nothing touched the two arrows that had gone through his chest. His legs tangled with Wyll's and the man's pulse seemed to pound through that point of connection, louder even than his panting breaths.

Wyll leaned his head against one of the black glass windows and watched the bridge below.

He didn't say anything.

In the growing silence, reality finally caught up to Astarion like a knife through his throat. Like the scream of hellfire when Karlach's body hit the ground. The others were dead. Everyone was dead. And if Wyll wanted someone to blame, Astarion was right there, unable to run from him. And Astarion had decided to hide with the man in a glorified tomb.

Astarion's head was pounding, the greys of their hiding place taking on a sour hue that he could feel in the back of his sinuses. Or maybe that was bile from earlier. The arrows still lodged in him were a shallow ache compared to the slush in his head and the panic that was threatening to rise up and swallow him.

"It was all Lae'zel's fault, really," Astarion said. Babbled. "I mean, she was the one that wanted to go to this blasted place, we all knew it was a horrible idea. If you–if you try and touch me I'll use the damn worm to put my boot through your skull, got it? Hands off."

He shouldn't have said that. Wyll got an awful queasy look to his face, and he *had* been practicing psychic defense earlier, even if he was rubbish at it. Astarion should have just pushed in and fixed Wyll so he didn't want to hurt Astarion anymore, rather than screaming out his plans and giving Wyll time to counter them.

The air between them was heavy, like a waterlogged corpse caught against a sewer outflow to the Chionthar. Astarion couldn't quite seem to breathe right, he couldn't choke it down.

"Astarion, peace," Wyll said. "I have no desire to hurt you. You did the right thing, forcing me to retreat."

"Of course I did," Astarion said. "I was looking out for you. For us." Wyll didn't actually believe that, of course. But if he was willing to pretend for a moment, Astarion could play pretend with the best stage actors in Baldur's Gate. (Namely, the whores who crooned that they wanted nothing more than the touch of sweet flesh at the elbow of a greasy-haired dockworker.)

Wyll said, "I'm sure circumstances are…tempting. But you've said it yourself, we're safer together than alone."

Enthralling Wyll was sounding more tempting by the minute. If he just reached out–he remembered how easy it had been to slide into Wyll's mind, how accommodating it had been. A repulsive place covered in Mizora's sticky fingerprints, but he could deal with a little unpleasantness in exchange for safety.

He'd be safe. Everyone else was dead, so if he fixed it so Wyll couldn't hurt him they'd be safe. The thought was so bizarrely alien. What would that feel like? Was the panic stuttering out through his lungs how you were supposed to feel at the thought of being safe?

If he broke Wyll's mind he'd be all alone. He could always tell when one of the mortal servitors was on their way to the Chionthar; they'd start stumbling, hands too clumsy for detailed work, mouth spilling slurred syllables as they stared at you in incomprehension. Astarion imagined Wyll like that, staggering after him like some guileless pet. Standing there useless as Astarion was pinned down by goblin raiders.

And that cambion. Mizora. She probably wouldn't like it if someone got handsy with her property.

That wouldn't be safe, would it? Because there were never any good options for him.

Astarion shifted, trying to reduce the pressure on the damned arrows. When his leg bumped against Wyll's, the man flinched, sword clanking against the stone.

They stared at each other in the darkness–Astarion had forgotten, he'd forgotten like an idiot that Wyll was capable of seeing in the dark too. His devil eye gleamed red–gods, they were a pair, weren't they?

He didn't want to go in Wyll's head again.

It was a tactical decision. Better as a threat than risk it and have it go wrong.

"If you hurt me I'll do it," Astarion said, trying to keep the threat light. "If you try to charm me or give me over to the Gith or *anything*, I won't hesitate. I'll do it. It's not my fault they're all dead, you can't pin that on me."

"I don't want to hurt you," Wyll said quietly, "and I know it's not your fault. Like I said, retreating was the right move. I know you have no reason to trust me, but please. Threaten anything else."

Begging ought to feel more satisfying. Instead, Astarion just felt like his skin was crawling, maggots in the tomb burrowing under his skin. He rubbed his hands against his legs, trying to dispel the chill. It wouldn't work, but he never could sit still.

"It's my only leverage," he said. "You're the monster hunter, Wyll, what could I do to hurt you?"

Wyll smiled, the appeasing sort of smile a person might direct to a child on the verge of a tantrum during a formal event. "Well, I'm not exactly at my best right now."

Wyll's hand was clamped against his side where an arrow had skimmed him, and there was blood tracing spiderwebs against the back of that hand. His ears and nose had bled profusely when the mind rippers attacked them; his devil eye was squinting in the darkness like his head hurt nearly as much as Astarion's.

The oozing blood was making his mouth water.

"All of your captors are dead except me," Wyll said softly. "If you were to be free of me, you could do as you pleased."

"Well, I wouldn't be free of you," Astarion said, waving his wrist at the man. "I'd be lugging your corpse around with magic handcuffs! Why do you think I jumped in front of you when that damned archer was trying to kill you earlier? I can't carry you. If you go down I'm trapped."

“You could wait it out,” Wyll said, shrugging. “What’s three days waiting in the dark for a vampire?”

Three days in the dark. The stone pressed against his shoulder, a dead body squeezed into the space alongside him, slowly losing heat and stiffening as rot began to set in. Time stretching out until he lost himself into the tomb again, the air stale and dried and musty, sinking into his lungs until each breath was a fresh agony, a reminder of where he was. His skin bubbled and rotting, his fingers worn to nubs from scratching at the stone, his arms gnawed-on and useless, every inch he could reach, just to feel something. Just to feel that time was passing in that endless eternity of starving and rotting in the dark.

Astarion whined. Anything would be better than this, being *abandoned*. He’d have taken the pike, if only someone would walk by occasionally and tell him that his Master had not forgotten him. He couldn’t keep going, he couldn’t keep doing this, but there was no escaping it. There was no choice except to endure, and he couldn’t and, gods, why had he ever feared death when living was so much worse? He wanted to scream for someone to hear him, to *help* him, but his voice was long since ripped away and his tongue was dried and stiff in his mouth, and -

There was a surge of horror that wasn’t his, a wellspring of it so deep and vast it felt like the ocean. Horror and anger, two emotions he’d long-since blunted down to the nubs and ceased feeling the way you were supposed to. The taste of them was a shock, like the way Karlach’s blood had tasted in his mouth, hot and biting, and Astarion realized he wasn’t alone in his head.

He jerked back, stone jostling the arrows pierced through him in a burst of pain so intense that the connection snapped. His eyes blinked open, and he found Wyll staring at him again, face streaked with tears.

“Stay the fuck out of my head,” Astarion said.

“I didn’t intend to. By the Triad, Astarion, I’m–there are no words.”

“Good. Let’s not talk about it.” Shit. Damn it to all the hells, how did he keep revealing weaknesses to this man without even intending to? Now Wyll knew the only thing he needed to do to make Astarion an incoherent blubbering *child* was shove him in a dark hole somewhere, and he wouldn’t be able to fight back. More reason to be the one to strike first.

“A truce?” Wyll said, offering Astarion his hand. “Neither of us have anything to gain by hurting each other. We both keep our parasites in check. We’re together in this. Allies, not captor and captive.”

“Partners?” Astarion asked, the ludicrous notion almost enough to make him smile. He made sure it came out a sneer. “The vampire and his hunter friend?”

“I hunt where I must, to stop innocents from being hurt,” Wyll said solemnly, only slurring his words a little. “I know that no apologies will ever settle what came between us at first, but you must know I am sincere now. As long as you don’t hurt innocents, we can be allies in truth.”

And the damned thing was that he'd been in Wyll's head, on that horrible spirit-snagged tumble into the Hells. He knew exactly what kind of man he was, the way he'd built honor and decency into a suit of armor that he could hide the wounded parts of his soul inside. And sure, that honor and decency was built on killing monsters. But it wasn't as if Astarion owed other monsters any loyalty–Cazador and his servants had never done anything but hurt him.

How much better to have a protector than a thrall. Astarion made himself smile prettily, his teeth tucked safely away. "Partners, then." Wyll's hand was warm against him, though Astarion wished he'd offered him the bloodied one instead. "Now, how about you do something about that hole in your side before you faint. I'm not getting trapped down here."

He pulled a healing potion out of the bag and handed it to Wyll. Then, on second thought, another one. At least killing that old woman had let them restock on healing supplies. Wyll uncorked the potions and drank them, one after the other. The amulet around his neck gleamed red and Wyll made a startled noise, leg jerking against Astarion's.

"What?" he asked. "Did that amulet zap you or something?" There were four more healing potions in the bag, amidst all the other junk.

He wasn't sure how many he'd need after the arrows came out, especially if they tried to heal his brain from the psychic rending first. The arrows really were a much bigger inconvenience, but you couldn't tell a healing potion what order to heal things in. He'd never needed to dose himself before; Cazador had always been the one to decide if an injury required healing faster than regeneration would supply it.

"I think it enhanced how well the potions work," Wyll said, sounding suddenly much clearer. "Felt tingly. Weird. But I think it closed up the arrow wound, so that's good. And my head feels better. You should wear it before we try healing you, see if it works a second time."

Wyll wasn't going to argue that he didn't need healing. Wouldn't be very partner-like to sit around guzzling healing potions while Astarion lay there twitching, but Astarion knew better than to *expect* generosity. "I need to get the arrows out first."

"Would it help if you–" Wyll hesitated, "–I don't know if it's presumptuous to offer, or if it would be of any use to you. But the blood. Would you like to…"

"Wyll, are you asking if I would like to *lick* you?" Astarion asked. What a humiliating notion. What an incredibly tempting smell, so close that it was almost heady. He'd had those little sips of Karlach's blood and they'd been divine. Wyll was hell-touched, would that give him any of the spicy sharpness of Karlach's blood?

"I'd rather you not bite me, but if you want what blood has already spilled, I see no reason to deprive you of it," Wyll said.

"Biting you isn't exactly an option right now," Astarion said, distracted, but he swayed closer, tempted. It was only a little blood, and half-clotted already, hardly worth debasing himself for. But perhaps he could soften Wyll by seeming properly grateful. Perhaps even soften him enough that he forgot Astarion's threat to lobotomize him a minute ago. And it did smell intoxicatingly good.

Wyll said cheerily, in the manner of a man who loved sharing fun facts, “Biting like a vampire might require fangs, but if you wanted to put your jaw muscles into it, even a human has the bite strength to tear the flesh from someone’s throat.”

A strange thought. Astarion had been so long forbidden from biting thinking creatures that he hadn’t actually…huh. Well. That was good to know. Not that he was going to tell Wyll he’d forgotten something as elementary as his ability to chew meat. “That sounds repulsive. Rest assured I have no interest in ripping and tearing, especially not if you’re willing to be generous.”

“My blood is your blood.” Wyll made a little half-bow in the darkness, like he was some noble’s son inviting Astarion to a dance. “What’s on the outside, anyway.”

The last of the boar that morning seemed a thousand years ago, the hunger rattling at his ribs like a beast in a cage. But Astarion wasn’t some fresh-turned spawn. He’d lain in pools of mortal blood, been forced to rub it over his face for Cazador to lick clean while he was shuddering with hunger. He could still think through the haze.

“The arrows first,” he said. “I don’t want to break them off in me.”

“Can you turn around?” Wyll asked. “I can help, but it’s going to be awkward with your legs in the way.”

Astarion didn’t have the leverage to yank them out from the back, and pulling the points out through his chest would be shudderingly stupid when Wyll was offering to help. Still, putting his back to the monster hunter was right down at the bottom of the list of things he wanted to do, short of leaning to the left and dumping his body down the shaft for the ladder.

Solonor Thelandira ought to be stuck through with arrows like a training dummy, why the fuck was there a god for arrows? He hated them. If the one had gone in a bit further up it would have pierced his chest where his heart ought to be and sent him into the fire, because they were enough like sharpened wood to be counted as stakes. And the curse didn’t care if his heart was in his chest or not. Vampirism was idiotic. He hated it. He hated everything.

Astarion inched himself around, steadying himself on Wyll’s knee so he didn’t fall off the ledge. One of the arrowheads caught on the stone, dragging the pain through him like a hook through flesh. He bit his lip and tried not to cry out.

Wyll reached out for him, guiding his shoulders till Astarion was caught between Wyll’s legs. For a head churning moment, Astarion thought he was going to pull him up onto his lap, expecting the press of a ridged devil cock against his back. But Wyll let go of his shoulders and he was just, there, bracketed between Wyll’s legs. *Because Wyll needs enough space to pull the damn arrows out, you empty-headed thrall,* a voice that sounded a great deal like Cazador’s hissed. He already knew they all found him repulsive; apparently revealing you were undead was the trick to keep yourself out of everyone’s bedrolls. Still, it was hard to relax with him so close. The blood smell was even richer, sweet like caramel in the way vampirism made you delusional.

Wyll's hand ghosted over his back, cataloging where the arrows exited. "I can't believe you were running with these in you."

"Hurts less than my head. Hurry up so I can do something about the damned headache," Astarion said.

"Get at least two healing potions ready. I think the bag you picked up is Gale's. The strong potions were in my bag, because nobody listened to me about distributing gear equally. You should have been in proper armor. If you weren't getting a weapon, you should have had armor." Wyll sounded genuinely upset, which was almost funny.

Still, it was nice to pretend sometimes that people cared. Astarion took two potions out of the bag. Wyll told him to try burning off most of the crossbow bolts with the nascent flare of a firebolt cantrip. The flame was a bit flickery, guttering in his hand from that damnable weakness, but he managed.

Wyll asked, "Are you ready for me to pull? I want you to press the mouth of the healing potion against the wound and pour it in directly."

"I've been ready, darling," Astarion said. He uncapped the flask in his hand, and the herbal tang of it filled the air, a vile distraction from the heady scent of blood. He let all the air out of his chest and braced himself for the arrow to be tugged free. The feeling of having objects drawn out from his flesh was a familiar wrongness, motion in too deep where there wasn't supposed to be sensation.

Astarion followed Wyll's instructions, though the sharp bite of the potion's enchantment spilling into him was enough to make him shove his wrist against mouth to muffle the urge to shout. His leg kicked out and he whacked his shin against the stone wall. Fuck.

Wyll, ever the gentleman now that it was more convenient for him to be so, pressed his hand against the back of the arrow wound to hold the healing potion inside. "You're doing good, just a moment and it'll absorb," he said soothingly. Astarion resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Like he couldn't feel his flesh squirming to fill the gap, knitting itself shut in a tentative, fragile repair. The amulet Wyll had laid around his neck glowed red and he could feel the tingling zip up his spine in a jolt.

The second arrow went out much like the first, except that he managed to not hit himself on the wall that time. And then he was free to twist himself around and press his face against the blissful-smelling blood smeared across Wyll's abdomen. "Don't you dare stake me," he warned, but couldn't hold himself back long enough to listen for Wyll's reply.

Wyll was fucking delicious.

Not in the way that anything was palatable when his stomach was empty and hunger was hot on his trail, no, Wyll was better than that. Better than deer or boars by far. Impossible to imagine it was the same substance as the sludge he'd squeezed out of the rats Cazador *rewarded* him with. Even better than Karlach, though the blood didn't make his tongue tingle in the same way. Maybe it was that his blood came with the salt-sweat flavor of warm skin rather than the cold metal of the cup Karlach had offered to him?

Velvet skin under his tongue, shivering as he traced out the newly formed scar, chased down the blood that had seeped into the waistband below. Astarion was distracted from plundering further by a bloodied hand reaching for him and, oh, that was nice too. So many creases for the blood to cling to, so much texture to explore with his mouth. Whorls and creases and little scars crisscrossing each finger. He held the hand in place to stop it from pulling away as he sucked it clean.

But there was still more. Up. Astarion pressed in close, lapping at the blood along the line of his neck, veins pounding sweet beneath his tongue. Gods, what a heady sensation. He followed the blood up, sucked kisses against the shell of an ear, then licked clean where it had spilled across a stubbled chin. Up over cracked lips, pulse humming sweet and quick beneath his tongue.

Oh, oh, *oh*, how had Cazador ever denied him this? He'd never once been good for Cazador, but he could have been so sweet if he'd been offered just a taste of something like this. The blood tried to pull away from him, but he wasn't done, there might still be a taste of it somewhere in a crease that he hadn't found. He wasn't done savoring this.

A hand tangled in his hair and Astarion knew that meant he was supposed to go back down. Was he supposed to be using his mouth for something else? A fair reward for a gift so sweet, he could do that.

Astarion sank down as Wyll tightened his grip and the sharp pain in his scalp yanked him out of that blood-soaked haze.

"–hey, hey, sorry," Wyll was saying. "I just don't want your tongue up my nose, okay?"

Fucking hells. Astarion panted, blinking the wetness out of his eyes–was he fucking *crying*? That was mortifying. He almost deep kissed Wyll's nostrils. His face felt hot, like he'd given himself rug burn on Wyll's chin like some sort of stupid animal. That was the second time he'd let himself go stupid over blood in front of Wyll, he needed to get himself under control.

"I'm sorry darling, I got a bit carried away there," he said, trying for blasé and definitely failing. "Can we just pretend that never happened and never speak of it ever again?"

He snuck a glance at Wyll. It was hard to tell in the grey darkness, but he thought Wyll might be blushing. Perhaps being slobbered over was a kink of his. Perhaps Astarion hadn't ruined everything.

"No, you're," Wyll hesitated, "you're fine, Astarion." Wyll released his grip on Astarion's hair, and crooked his fingers for prestidigitation, wiping clean the rest of the blood and spit into wherever magic spirited away such things. "I'm glad I could help you. Obviously I won't tell the others anything, if you'd rather keep this private."

What?

"What?" Astarion squinted at him. "The others died. They're dead."

“A soul doesn’t depart the body immediately on death,” Wyll said. “We have several revivify scrolls in our supplies–if we can get to their bodies before their souls move on to the fugue plane we can bring them back.”

Astarion blinked at him. Dead was dead, wasn’t it? He was aware that high level clerics could bamboozle death, but he thought that was the domain of the rich and powerful. The name “revivify” didn’t really scream “bring back to life after being stabbed through the neck”. When Gale had mentioned they’d had those scrolls, Astarion had assumed they were some sort of pick-me-up, like a nice strong cup of coffee. And they had more than one of them?

For the first time, he considered the possibility that someone besides Cazador might have been able to save his life. Might have been able to *actually* save his life, and send him on his way back to his career and his family and his friends and whatever other lovely luxuries the dead version of him had enjoyed in those halcyon days. He could have lived.

But clearly not. If someone was going to revive him, they had plenty of time to do that before they buried him. Unless being transformed into a spawn prevented such resurrections? Loviatar’s tits, his head hurt. He wasn’t going to think about it. He wasn’t going to think about how someone had decided he was better off dead and miserable little clerics and insufferable wizards and maybe all the adventurers on the Sword Coast got pop up again and again like weeds in the pavement. He was going to just. Not think about that.

Except Wyll was still talking.

“I know you have little reason to love them, but we still need to figure out a solution to these parasites before we’re transformed, and the work will be easier with more hands at the ready,” Wyll said.

“No,” Astarion protested. “This is a horrible idea. You want to go back out into that trap on the *possibility* that their souls might be hanging around waiting for you? No.”

“We know how many githyanki were in that room when we faced them. I can see the bridge from here. Once I see the inquisitor and his mages leave, we can sneak in.”

“No! There is a ladder right here that leads,” Astarion glanced up into the dark, “that *probably* leads to the monastery. We’ve got a perfectly good escape route, and you want to throw our lives away for a servant of an evil goddess, a servant of an evil lich who *betrayed* us, a wizard with an expiration date and a–and Karlach?”

“They’re our allies.”

Because everything was so simple to the Blade of Frontiers. “They’re *your* allies. You really think I’m going to believe I’m better off with more captors around threaten me?”

“I think that we both want to live–”

“Could have fooled me,” Astarion muttered. People who wanted to live took nice convenient escape routes when their vampiric minder dragged them to them; they didn’t throw

themselves back into danger on the chance that they might be able to resurrect a group of horrible strangers they'd met less than a week earlier.

"–and that will require having these parasites dealt with, the sooner the better. The crèche was a dead end. Our next best option is to rescue the Archdruid from the cult encampment. Do you want to attempt that alone?"

Astarion hissed in frustration. "No! I don't want to do any of this, obviously, you utter twit! But why would the damned druid want to help me anyway? I'm an aberration of nature, an offense to the natural order, all that. And in the time it takes us to get to him, we'll probably all be squids anyway, so why risk getting skewered when we could take the time we have left and bloody run with it?"

"We've shown no symptoms," Wyll said, "far beyond when we should have begun to transform. The creature hiding within the artifact claimed to have bound the transformation. And then Vlaakith wanted the–the artifact." Wyll froze. "Astarion, do we have the artifact?"

"My head isn't completely empty," Astarion said, fishing the pointed thing out of the pack and waving it at Wyll. It was heavier than it looked, which made sense if it held a part of another realm inside it. Did that make sense? It was heavy. "And maybe the artifact, or whoever the Lich bitch thinks is hiding within the artifact, is keeping us from transforming. It's not doing that for free. And if we've got it, the damned Gith are never going to stop chasing us."

"Which is why we need help. Allies. Who else would agree to throw themselves against the tides of such desperate odds, that we could afford to throw away four allies at the first obstacle?" Wyll asked, implacably.

"Being *dead* isn't a small obstacle, Wyll!"

"No," Wyll agreed. "But we have the means to counter it. We need to try while there's still time."

Astarion bit his lip in order to help resist the urge to thrust his entire forearm in his mouth and bite himself bloody. Wyll was infuriating. But. He wasn't necessarily wrong. If the artifact, or some creature hiding inside it, was doing some mystic woo-woo to keep them from turning into mindflayers, then that opened up the possibility of survival. And once survival was on the table, so was *freedom*. He wasn't going to lie down and die when there was the chance to finally be free.

But that freedom was conditional as long as the others were alive to turn on him. Right now he finally had the upper hand. If he wanted to, he could use the worms to overrule Wyll and get them up the ladder and to safety (safety that would be short-lived, since the githyanki would be hunting them down, but still). If the others were alive he would be back at the bottom getting stomped on. And if Wyll told them what Astarion had threatened, he'd be back in chains with a knife in his eye, for sure.

"They're your allies, Wyll," Astarion said again. "Not mine."

“They will be,” Wyll promised. “Enough of this shit. Enough. If you help me bring them back, that’s proof enough that you’re our ally and our equal. I won’t stand for anything less.”

Astarion snorted. “A likely story.”

“When I give my word, I do not lie,” Wyll said, chin up. “We will raise Gale first and have him dissolve the bonds holding you. I will see it done.”

The warlock didn’t show any tells, but he’d already proven himself to be an excellent liar, keeping his patron and his nature both hidden from them all. This wasn’t a lie Astarion would be able to sniff out. If he was going to agree to this–to this *monumental* stupidity, he needed to be sure. “Show me,” he said.

Wyll frowned. “How?”

Astarion poked him between the horns. “Worm to worm, show me you mean it.”

When Wyll finally realized what he was asking, there was a delicious moment of fear on his face. *Good.* That was the point. If he was willing to connect to Astarion, open himself up, give Astarion the opportunity, then maybe, *maybe* that meant Astarion wasn’t stupid to leave that opportunity to rot on the vine.

Wyll squared that fear away behind the mask of his hero persona, all steely determination, and closed his eyes.

The worm rolled over, like a dog begging for treats, and the delicious blood he’d quaffed rose in Astarion’s throat. He swallowed against it as the sensation fell away into something less solid. A feeling of resolute surety, even as fears snapped away somewhere beneath them. An image. Wyll standing between Shadowheart and some silver-haired scoundrel who–wait, is that supposed to be him?

Astarion was entirely distracted from the details of Wyll’s fantasy by the sudden revelation of his face. The shape of his nose he’d almost known from the feel, his hair color from the bits Godey had ripped free from his scalp. Put all together, the pieces he’d known seem disjoint, like a poorly assembled puppet, faded brittle by sunlight. The people he’d fooled into believing him living must have been idiots. The bite marks on his neck were pitted like pox scars, sunk into the flesh too deep to be disguised by a bit of powder. His eyes gleamed crimson.

In the fantasy, Astarion was holding a sword, and wearing leather armor, with a bow at his back and a sharp smile on his face. He looked competent. Confident. Dangerous, even. Astarion liked *that* a great deal, even if he wished he could paw at his double’s face until the wrinkles were smoothed away and he looked the way he felt. Wyll stood between him and the wretched cleric, and stood beside him as an equal, and raised Karlach from the dead and buried himself in her arms, fire be damned -

That was quite enough of that. Astarion shook himself out of the connection and Wyll’s apparent crush. So the man believed he believed what he said. That wasn’t a guarantee. It wasn’t enough. But it was more than he’d expected.

“So how do you propose we recover their bodies before they get hacked up into wolf chow?”

There were an abundance of holes to be poked in Wyll’s paper-thin plan. Astarion decided he enjoyed being the hole poker a great deal more than the plan paperer.

They didn’t have any proof that the Inquisitor and his mages would ever leave the chamber– maybe their bitch queen preferred for them to sleep on the ground. She reminded him of Cazador with sharper teeth, so that seemed plausible.

Maybe they’d leave and then return, suddenly, while they were trying to make off with their resurrected allies. Wyll had neglected to mention initially that resurrection would leave all their allies weak as kittens until Shadowheart could use her healing magic to pep them back up.

Maybe they’d get there and discover the Inquisitor had requisitioned all their scrolls for the good of githkind. Maybe they’d have burnt all their bodies to crisps and the scrolls would be useless.

Wyll couldn’t paper over all those branching paths to failure, especially since he stolidly refused to acknowledge the possibility that they might not be able to revive the others. “It’s not been too long,” he said. “They’ll hold on for us.”

If Wyll was wrong he wasn’t going to admit it till the proof was right in front of him.

At which point, Astarion figured they could get back to the ladder and scoot, as long as they weren’t killed. Wyll watched the window, devil-enhanced sight letting him peer out through the dark glass, while Astarion fidgeted with the knife Wyll had given him.

It had a solid heft to it, the handle wrapped in leather and the blade only a bit nicked. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d handled a weapon with permission, and was trying to remind himself how it went. Sharp part into the other guy, preferably while they weren’t looking or expecting it.

At last Wyll signaled him that he’d spotted the Inquisitor and his retinue on the bridge. They waited another few minutes in painful silence. Astarion tried to keep his mind quiet too, and prayed to no one in particular that stone would work to keep any mind mages from sniffing out their thoughts in the air. He’d expected a hue and cry to go up after they ran, but it had never come. His hand tightened on the knife. Wyll’s heartrate was a rolling drumbeat, clamorous in the narrow space.

The moment passed. No githyanki ripped open the door to drag them out by their feet and begin the work of separating their skin from their flesh. Nothing reached into their minds to rip them asunder once more. Wyll didn’t seem much cheered by this, but he signaled for them to continue nonetheless.

The gap at the base of the great iron door was a slit of candlelight spilling across the stone floor of the bridge. No scouts yelled out when they climbed over the railing, or when they crept down the stairs to hide behind one of the oversized statues.

Astarion set the pack down by the plinth, keeping the knife in one hand and the bottle of grease in the other. Wyll hooked a few of the scroll cases to his belt and drew his sword.

At the door Wyll dropped to a crouch, then lay down such that he could see into the room beneath the door. He held up two fingers to Astarion. The plan was on. Darkness seemed to crackle out of the air, arcing around his fingers as he said the incantation: “Demento te.”

There was a shout from within the room, then the ring of steel on steel. Wyll lay still, concentrating on the spell that would set one of the guards against the other, driving them to madness. Astarion couldn’t picture the fight from the noises he was hearing–the clanking of boots, a sword maybe, githyanki curses muffled beyond the steel. He just kept his head ducked down and hoped no scout would hear the noise and venture out to investigate; his complexion did him no favors in staying unseen in the dark.

And then Wyll was scrambling to his feet, shoving the doors open. The shirtless warrior with the crossbow lay at the top of the stairs, blood pooling beneath him from a stab wound to the chest. The greatsword-wielding warrior that had dealt the wound was a woman wearing a spiked helmet in the shape of a dragon’s crest. The madness of Wyll’s spell might have worn off, but there was a different wide-eyed madness on her face when she saw them push the doors closed behind them. She charged.

Astarion flung the grease bottle at her. And, well, missing wasn’t so bad, because she still slipped and fell back on her ass with a satisfying clash of armor. He followed that with a firebolt and ducked low, letting the blast of hot air at his back tell him he hit the target.

She didn’t scream and kept hold of her weapon through the fire, but Wyll followed that with a command laced with arcane power that had her sword clattering to the ground. He followed that with a thrust up and through the hollow of her neck.

Her eyes bulged and she made a ghastly noise. Wyll pulled the sword free and she crumpled.

“Needs must,” Wyll said quietly. Then he let loose an eldritch blast a few inches from the woman’s forehead, settling any doubts on if she still lived.

Astarion took the opportunity to slit the other Gith’s throat. There was rather a lot of blood spilled, some of it dripping down the stairs. Surely Wyll couldn’t complain if they were already dead…and better to get that argument settled before they tried resurrecting the others.

They were laid out on one of the lower platforms, three bodies in a line. Karlach cold, not even a spark of fire as she laid there with her throat slit. The damned cleric bearing no obvious fatal wounds, but face slathered with blood like it had poured out of her every orifice. Gross. And Lae’zel, who was beat to shit, but that didn’t much matter because her head was lying on the ground next to her.

Three bodies.

Wait.

“Where’s the wizard?” Astarion said, looking around. Their packs and what looked like most of their supplies were spread out on the table to the left of the entrance. There was plenty of blood. Some other fluids he wasn’t thinking about and was pretending he couldn’t smell. Three of their dead and the two guards.

“They must have taken him somewhere,” Wyll said faintly.

“Or incinerated him into ash,” Astarion suggested.

“You’d smell it if they’d burned someone here,” Wyll said. He was still staring at Lae’zel’s body like she was a book, and he was a formerly literate man with a serious head injury. “It’s not a smell you forget, burning people. We’ll ask the guards, after we revive the others.”

Astarion almost said something biting about how if Wyll wanted to interrogate the guards he might have thought of that *before* they killed them, but he remembered at the last moment that Wyll had that weird skull necklace that let him ask dead people questions.

“A very smart plan, absolutely, ask the guards once you’re done with this lot,” Astarion said. “Would it stop the magic from working if I took a little nibble? You were delicious, darling, but hardly more than a snack.”

Wyll startled. Looked at Astarion, then at the dead bodies and the blood on the floor. “Oh. Right. Best not be hungry while–the woman, not the other guard. I was the one who killed her, so she’s likely to reject the spell anyway,” he said. Then: “I have to revive Shadowheart first.”

“Must we?” Astarion asked, pushing the guard’s body down the stairs so he could sit and eat in comfort while Wyll faffed about with spell scrolls.

Of Wyll’s allies, Shadowheart was the one he would most prefer remain dead indefinitely. Permanently, even. But they’d already argued about that, and he knew Wyll wasn’t going to leave anyone behind regardless of how sweetly Astarion begged him. Not even murderous clerics whose greatest ambition was presumably turning them all into fellow Sharrans under pain of torture.

“We need her healing magic. And I need her…expertise.” He swallowed. “For Lae’zel.”

Astarion didn’t think Shadowheart would be any more enthusiastic about reviving Lae’zel than he was enthusiastic about reviving Shadowheart.

He was also suspicious, based on how incredibly suspicious Wyll was acting, that being headless was a condition that scrolls didn’t fix. Which was a shame, because if they had spares he could have suggested cutting Lae’zel’s head off a few more times and reviving her in the name of fairness.

He’d find out soon enough, and more importantly he had better things to do than ask. He sat down on the steps and used his knife to dig a little deeper into the Gith’s neck to get the blood flowing.

She wasn't–well. She was a far sight better than a rat, and better than the deer and the boar. He shouldn't let himself get spoiled so quickly just because Karlach and Wyll tasted amazing. Shadowheart hadn't been that good either, he didn't think, though it was difficult to filter out the taste from ravenous starvation. Perhaps githyanki ate weird stuff and it made their blood less delicious.

While he dined, Wyll unrolled the scroll at his belt and knelt by Shadowheart's body. He read the incantation and gold light spilled forth from the rolled paper. Astarion stopped sucking at the dead guard's neck for a moment as the air seemed to ring with a sudden hollowness, like the space between the tollings of a temple bell.

When the light faded and ringing stopped, the world seemed to come back to full color. And Shadowheart looked just as dead as she had before.

"No," Wyll whispered.

He got up and strode towards the table with their supplies. Astarion followed him rather than be dragged. Then he went back to glutting himself while Wyll tried the second scroll on Karlach. This time when it didn't work he felt a little pang of something in his chest. It would have been good to have Karlach around. She was the least awful out of the lot. Seemed unfair for her to escape Avernus only to end up stabbed to death over githyanki politics.

But that was life. Unfair and shitty and then you died.

Wyll dropped the emptied scroll case and stood there, fists clenching on nothing. In the silence, Astarion sucking on the Gith seemed to grow louder and louder, and he was torn between swallowing faster and freezing in place. This was the moment when Wyll realized everyone was actually dead and he was delusional to have ever thought otherwise. This was the moment when he realized there was someone he could blame.

"No." Wyll went down to his knees, lifting Karlach's hand in his. She'd gone cold enough to touch in death, skin to skin. Wyll leaned forward, pressed the back of her hand to his cheek. Kissed it. Perhaps his aversion to necrophilia didn't run as deep as Astarion had assumed. "I refuse," Wyll said. "No."

Astarion unlatched from the githyanki's neck and wiped off his face on the sleeve of his gambeson. He wasn't going to beat Wyll in a knife fight but still, he wanted the blade in his hand, he wanted it ready.

"I just got you, I'm not letting you go yet," Wyll said, like a crazy person. "I'm not letting go of you."

And Astarion knew he should keep his mouth shut, but the words just slipped out. "Darling, she's dead."

"I know that," Wyll snarled. He heaved for breath, setting Karlach's hand back down, then continued in a quieter voice: "It should have worked. We were only gone for a little while."

"It felt like hours. How long do you usually wait to use those things?"

“I don’t know!” Wyll turned on him, eyes flashing. “I don’t know. I haven’t used them before. Because I have *never* had allies to fight beside. I’ve never been allowed the *privilege*. And that is why I’m not giving up on you, and I’m not giving up on her, and I’m not giving up on any of them. I burned for her. It can’t have been for nothing. It can’t.”

Astarion stared at him, waited for Wyll to do…whatever it was he was going to do. Saying *of course it can be for nothing, getting nothing when you need something is a universal constant,* might get him a rapier through the eye, so that was out. And what else was there to say?

“Wait.” Wyll’s hand dipped into the pouch at his belt and he pulled out the skull necklace that let him speak with the dead. “The servant of Jergal who we met in the tomb. He said that he could revive the dead, that he would offer his services to us.”

“The zombie with his face held on with bits of gold wire?” Astarion remembered that thing. It had spoken pretentiously about not being able to sever Cazador’s bargain with the devil who’d taken his heart and then walked off into the woods.

“He didn’t say what he was, only that he had power. And based on the fact that we found him in a temple to Jergal, hidden behind a statue of Jergal, I assume he is an servant of the Final Scribe. The resurrection magic he might offer would be far greater than revivification.”

“And how are we supposed to find him?”

“He said that he would come if called upon in camp,” Wyll said. “We should have asked for more specific instructions. Does that mean only in the place we were camping when we met? And if he can appear there, why not here?”

“Why should the gods and their servants allow themselves to be summoned on a mortal’s whim when we could instead be forced to bend and scrape for their amusement?” Astarion said.

“Aye,” Wyll agreed. “But for this I will bend and scrape like the lowest of beasts, if necessary.”

And he went back to his knees, holding the pendant aloft. “Servant of Jergal, I call upon you to ask the services you once offered. My companions have fallen, and I would pay the price to lift them from the fugue lands to walk beside me. Please answer my call. If you do not hear me now, I will walk every mile from here to your temple with their bodies upon my back to throw them upon your altar. Please answer.”

The room was silent, but not a mystical god-touched silence. Just a normal silence, where two people waited for something that wasn’t going to happen.

“Please tell me you weren’t serious about carrying them,” Astarion said eventually. “That is, frankly, impossible. One of them, maybe. Shadowheart or Lae’zel might be light enough to carry if you took off their armor. But not while climbing a ladder! We have no way out of here if we’re dragging three dead bodies.”

“Astarion, please.”

“You told me we should risk our lives on the chance they could be saved. They can’t! Now we know that! Not without us fighting our way through the crèche and getting caught and killed.”

“We’ll think of something,” Wyll said.

Escaping the crèche whilst carrying three dead bodies that each weighed more than Astarion wasn’t something you just *thought of something* to solve on the fly. It was the sort of problem you planned for in advance by not getting everyone killed. Or at least bringing a wagon. Or some very specific magical artifacts that could conveniently shrink dead bodies down to doll size or some nonsense like that -

“The artifact,” Astarion said. “We can put them in the artifact.”

“What.”

Astarion plucked the thing from his bag triumphantly. “The magic githyanki portal circle opened up a whatsit from this artifact to a pocket dimension inside of it, right? So if we just put the artifact back in the portal, we can stick the bodies in there, put the artifact in a bag and carry them out! It’s genius!”

Wyll looked at the artifact, then at the bejeweled portal circle. “Lae’zel did definitely go somewhere inside there, I suppose there must be…but how would we get them back out again?”

He hadn’t thought of that. “Surely if this ghoul is so powerful that he can resurrect the dead he can pluck them out of convenient magic portals.”

“We’d be risking a lot on that assumption,” Wyll said, shaking his head. “Besides, I don’t know how to operate a Planecaster. Even if we could activate it, I don’t know how to stop it from alerting Vlaakith that we had done so. We most assuredly do not want to face her again.”

And no, he didn’t, but it wasn’t like Wyll was suggesting a better plan.

He said, “I’d like to see you suggest a better plan.”

“We can take them into the Underdark,” Wyll said. “I have two scrolls of feather fall. If we use it to go over the edge of the bridge, it’ll likely take us to the Underdark. We can make our way back to the grove and our original camp down below. Slowly, but without fear of pursuers.”

“Your plan is for us to jump off a bridge?” Astarion asked. That was not a better plan. That was definitely a worse plan. “And then strand ourselves in the labyrinth of eternal darkness where we can be eaten by giant creatures that look like centipedes with tentacles.”

Astarion had never been in the Underdark, but he’d read things. Reputable sources. There were creatures down there, and from what he’d read most of them were either chitinous,

oozes or poisonous. Nothing edible, everything dangerous.

“I’ve plenty of experience in traversing the Underdark,” Wyll said. “There are always more entrances than you’d expect. And Gale mentioned that they’d encountered a deep gnome in that village who’d mentioned plans to return to the Underdark shortly. There must be an entrance somewhere near the village.”

“Absolutely not.”

“The githyanki know we have the artifact now and will likely be intent on pursuit,” Wyll said. “We know they have patrols up above. Going through the monastery sets us within their path. The Underdark may not be safe, but as long as we’re not seen they’ll have no reason to suspect that’s where we’ve gone.”

“Because it’s insane! It’s an insane thing to do.”

“I’m afraid we do not have a safe and sensible option on offer,” Wyll said with a wry smile. “What must I offer you for you to agree to follow me into the Underdark?”

He didn’t need to offer Astarion anything, was the thing. Either Astarion could shove into his head and stop this conversation entirely, or Wyll could use his superior physical strength and warlock magic to make Astarion do what he wanted. Astarion took a moment to consider, again, the benefits of using his tadpole to get into Wyll’s head. The primary benefit would be getting him to drop this obsession with carrying all of their dead companions like cordwood in search of a ghoul with delusions of grandeur and a taste for facial bondage.

But the risks were an abyss of unknowns. He’d succeeded in enthralling Wyll once, for less than five minutes. If Wyll managed to shake him off or woke up, he’d kill Astarion in retaliation. Going the other way, pushing Wyll too deep, could leave him stranded with dead weight that didn’t remember it could walk.

No. No, it wasn’t worth it. The threat was worth it, the risks of following through weren’t. After all, the threat must be why Wyll was trying to bargain with him.

“I want my pick of our supplies, and people don’t get to reclaim them if they’re resurrected,” Astarion said, testing the waters.

“Besides personal effects they arrived with? Sure,” Wyll said.

“I don’t want to carry the bag with Lae’zel’s head in it,” Astarion said. “I mean, I would rather not carry any dead bodies at all. But there’s three of them and two of us, so not carrying would mean being trapped in the Underdark even longer. They’re going to rot. This is going to be disgusting.”

“I’ll carry as much as I can. We’ve strength potions that were intended for Karlach that can make the work easier. And I can cast Armor of Agathys on myself, that will give a steady source of ice to keep the bodies cool.”

“You’ve got answers for everything, don’t you,” Astarion sneered. He was going to do this. He was going to let this damned warlock drag him into the dark, underground. So much further underground than the tomb had been, with no way of escaping except to trust Wyll’s subterranean sense of navigation. “Then the last thing I want is to be able to feed on you. You can eat mushrooms or whatever blind cave fish or whatever else grows down there. I’m not going to starve. If we can’t find warm-blooded creatures then I get to feed on you.”

Wyll’s face softened. “Astarion, I wasn’t going to leave you to starve.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time.”

“But it was the last. We’re allies now,” Wyll said. He smiled and repeated his stupid joke from earlier, “And my blood is your blood, if you have need of it. Within reason.”

“Then fine. Let’s all hurl ourselves to our deaths and get eaten by overgrown spiders and sentient slimes,” Astarion said, gesturing wildly.

“In a moment,” Wyll said, slipping the skull-faced amulet back around his neck. “I need to find out what’s happened to Gale.”

He’d used the amulet to speak to plenty of dead bodies on the hike towards the monastery, the magic has lost its novelty. Wave his hand, glowing eye, body levitates and light pours out of its orifices while it answers. Really raised the question of if light would shine out of *all* of its orifices or only the socially acceptable ones. Astarion would have to ask later if Wyll knew, the question would probably fluster him delightfully.

“There was a wizard in purple robes in this room. Why is he not among the bodies?” Wyll asked.

The dead hated to speak in complete sentences, and so the topless warrior moaned, “Resurrected… Inquisitor’s orders…the istik’s illusion threatened death…an explosion…if not revived.”

“The orb,” Wyll said. “Do you mean he said that the orb, the foreign magic within him would explode if it wasn’t allowed to feed off his life force?”

“Yes,” the corpse said. “The ardents…sensed its power…stealing life…the risk too great.”

“What are they going to do with the wizard?” Wyll asked.

“Need to research…disable magic…remove danger to the crèche. Kept sleeping…in stasis pod…seeking answers from crèche library.” So Gale was alive and taking a little restorative nap while the rest of them were dead or slogging through shit? Typical. But of course Wyll couldn’t be happy with that:

“Will they hurt him?”

“The magic…unstable… the Inquisitor ordered no one touch the istik.”

“You said a stasis pod. Where are those located?” *Uh-oh.*

“Lower pools…beneath the hatchery. Submerged.”

With that the light guttered from the body, and it collapsed onto the ground in an ungainly heap.

“Well this is excellent news,” Astarion said, clapping his hands. “Gale hadn’t mentioned that if he died the damned orb would try to eat *us* next. Though I suppose the fact that it would explode if he died should have been obvious. But this is good, right? They won’t kill him, they’re too scared to hurt him, he gets to take a nice cozy nap while we work our asses off to save this lot.”

Wyll was still staring at the body. “We can’t leave him here.”

“Yes we can. In fact, we have to! Because I am, under no circumstance, going to take on the crèche with only the two of us! Committing suicide by githyanki won’t help Gale, and it would keep you from your insane plan to save the others. Absolutely not. The dead Gith just said that they wouldn’t even touch him!”

Wyll hesitated. Because Astarion was right. He was fucking right. There was no universe in which they could run around the crèche, locate a secret science pod, figure out how to disable it, drag the wizard out of it and get back to the dead body weightlifting program without someone seeing them, and being piled on by twenty githyanki.

“Without the artifact Gale might transform,” Wyll said. “We don’t know how far the Dream Guardian’s influence stretches.”

“We also don’t know the artifact is doing anything to prevent us from transforming,” Astarion pointed out. “Just because the thing inside it is the lich bitch’s enemy doesn’t mean they aren’t lying to us.”

“But if they aren’t, and we leave, and Gale transforms…”

“Whereas if we stay, and the githyanki find us, and then we all die? And you go straight to the hells and *I* get revived while they cut little bits of me off until the damn parasite finally transforms me? That will certainly be a great help to Gale and the rest of these idiots,” Astarion sneered.

Wyll closed his eyes and breathed out slowly. He was wavering. Good. He should waver. He should waver right into the obvious conclusion that dramatic self-sacrifice was a great ending for tragic copper novels and stupid in real life. The urge to point out that none of them would be in this situation if Wyll had vetoed Lae’zel’s horrible plan to go to the crèche in the first place was aching to slip off his tongue, but he was resisting.

“We’ll leave him for now,” Wyll said, “because we must.”

“Yes! Because we must. And we’re very sad about it,” Astarion said, “let’s grab the stuff and go. What? Someone could be back here any minute.”

Their potions and scrolls and small equipment were all shoveled into two packs for them to carry–better not to risk any glass vials getting crushed on the way down. They had plenty of rope in the bags, so Wyll tied Karlach's axe, Lae'zel's greatsword and Shadowheart's mace to the dead bodies.

"I hope you know that's going to be more weight for us to carry," Astarion said. "For absolutely no reason. It's not like she can swing an axe while she's dead."

"If we stash the heavy equipment in the Underdark it will be easier to fetch later than if we left it here," Wyll said as he tore down one of the banners to wrap Lae'zel's head in. He bundled her up into another pack, which he strapped across his chest. "If that's everything, we best move out."

It wasn't a simple walk with three bodies on hand. They had to drag each of them between the two of them, stashing them behind the cover of the bridge statues while the fetched the others. Then Wyll opened the feather fall scroll and read out the incantation and they heave'ho'd the bodies over the side into the abyss.

Wyll hesitated, looking back towards the far side of the bridge and the crèche beyond.

The magic wouldn't last long. Rather than try to talk sense into the man, Astarion climbed over the railing and jumped.

Chapter End Notes

p.s. I forgot to mention; as always, this fic diverges from canon whenever I think that would be more fun. In this case: you cannot actually get to the underdark by jumping off the bridge in the creche. I just figure any decent abyss is a good entrance to the Underdark. I also made up the idea that the bridge supports leading into the Inquisitor's chamber could be hollow and have hidden archer's lookouts - though I can't think of any other good reason why they should be so large and have tiny windows in them. There was a shortage of plausible hiding places so I made something up.

Chapter 12: Wyll

Chapter Notes

Hello again! I've been very busy so far in 2025 doing things that aren't writing - mostly making instructional guides for my bookbinding club. If you ever want to get into typesetting and have questions about open source fonts, perhaps my serif font guide would interest you! And if you ever get into making books by hand and you want to be a weirdo who does gothic style medieval tightbacks that lay flat nicely for reading, I also assembled a 39 page guide on making K-118 style bindings (though I'm still working on the illustrations).

But! between those things I wrote another chapter of No Good End! As I mentioned in the comments last time, I have an outline sketched for the rest of the fic, though I do have other projects I'm working on and don't plan to write this straight through. I still plan to end this fic at the end of Act 1; though it *might* get an epilogue or flash-forward to the end of the game. We shall see. I know that leaving Cazador untouched would be unsatisfying, but also if I wrote the entire game at this pace we would be here several decades 🤣

But yes, I have a few other projects to go back to before I get to the next chapter (currently doing the Wyllstarion Server Remix Exchange!) so I apologize for the cliffhanger to come :3

In reference to the many comments last chapter, RIP Gale if you did this in canon but he'll be fiiiiiiiiiiiiiine. Surely the githyanki can invent illithid conversion shielding stasis chambers. He'll be fine. Pay no attention to me shoving inconvenient canon under the couch cushions to enable my "handcuffed together in the underdark" shenanigans.

content warnings this chapter for some frank discussion of dead body grossness and buried-alive imagery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If you could die from shame, Wyll would be long since dead.

His father had always hoped that Wyll might overcome his deficiencies and become a leader of men. Someone with the strength of arm and character, with the judgement and prudence, with the sheer *grit* to be a leader worth following. Until his fantasies were dashed on the rocks of Mizora’s bargain, Wyll had hoped for that too.

His allies had given him the gift of their trust and he’d led them to destruction.

That everyone had died on his watch was irrevocable. The shame was a living thing, like the feeling of Mizora’s arms around his shoulders, the fleshy embrace of her wings.

He still couldn't find the path he ought to have taken instead. The compromise that would have kept them from the crèche, from them turning on each other in a fight for possession of the artifact. Perhaps that compromise did not exist.

He could feel the weight of his father's judgement on his shoulders too, the calculus of one life against many, the tap-tap-tap of abacus beads sliding into place. His father would never have bowed to Lae'zel's demands out of love for her; he would not have loved Lae'zel for her wide-eyed curiosity and the way she offered up her skills like breathing and the way she'd rubbed him with honey and herbs like a Midwinter ham.

Wyll could not be his father. He couldn't have turned on Lae'zel, no matter how her faith called her to destruction like a moth to flame. If a leader needed to be able to do that then he was no leader, and he could never be.

If a better man had been in Wyll's place, if the Blade was not just a fantasy but a hero, they could have found the right path. Found a way to dissuade Lae'zel from her belief in the crèche as salvation long enough to find a cure elsewhere. Wyll had to believe there was a way that they could have all been saved, even if he had failed to find it.

He was sick on necessary sacrifices and cruelties and he could bear no more.

The shame from how he had allowed the others to treat Astarion, how *he* had treated Astarion, had already clotted in his throat. He'd thought cruelty necessary. He'd been wrong, his feeble attempts at leadership rotting from the start.

He could still feel the impact of his blade shuddering against Astarion's ribs, feel the awful warmth of blood and hellfire-churned water soaking through to the skin, feel the conviction that said violence was the only answer. It was muddled with the feeling of a healing potion blotted against broken fingers and a rope looped round the neck of a deer and a soul clinging tight to his as Mizora ripped his skull open to sculpt him in her image.

But shame could not kill you. And a warlock could not, in good conscience, wish for death. Not knowing what awaited them after.

There were mistakes you could not take back, only try to make amends for. That was a lesson his father had taught, one lesson that Wyll had been capable of learning. When he'd stolen and lied to blame a household servant as a child, his punishment did not take back his crime. He'd needed to learn how a servant's life hinged on the goodwill of their masters. He'd needed to strive to give back to the less fortunate whenever he could. To dedicate himself to scrupulous honesty to avoid ever blaming another for his faults. Making amends was never so simple as punishment.

He'd made the call to treat Astarion as a monster. He'd failed to realize Astarion was a potential ally. He'd failed to convince Shadowheart and Lae'zel to treat their prisoner with respect. And so the fear that Astarion had learned there must bear upon his shoulders. Wyll had found mercy too late, offered a hand of friendship too late. He'd been so consumed with trying to placate Shadowheart as he led her, terrified, towards the Crèche that he hadn't even ensured Astarion had an even share of enchanted armor. (though if Astarion wanted to take

the damned armor that had left his side exposed to be spitted with arrows, Wyll would happily yield it to him)

He couldn't then be surprised that Astarion thought him no more than a sword-swinging sadist who'd take the first opportunity to pin the blame for his failures of leadership on someone else.

From his brushes with Astarion's mind, from the words that slipped his lips, he knew that cruelties inflicted upon him were the meat and sinew of Astarion's life beneath his sire. Kindness was a foreign thing. Trust was a trap that led to greater suffering. He could not be surprised that Astarion, desperate for control, unable to trust him, would threaten to use one of the few weapons at hand to wrest that control for himself.

He couldn't be surprised, and he wasn't allowed to be hurt.

(he was hurt, he was, but he was not allowed to feel those things)

But Wyll couldn't bar himself from terror. One day he would be but flesh for Mizora to command, all that had once been Wyll scoured away. He had wondered, sometimes, if he would remember any part of himself after he was pulled from the pits. If it would be the same as when she puppeted his body, a silent scream locked behind his teeth. Or if he would just be an empty husk, animated solely by malice and servitude.

In his nightmares, his flesh took the knife willingly from her hand.

He would bear any punishment rather than have Astarion do that to him.

He must make amends. He must show Astarion he was a friend and no longer a threat. He must plant and tend the seeds of trust in the razed ruins of their alliance. He must find a way to bring the others back to Jergal's servant and raise them again. He must return to recover Gale, who would be whole and unturned. There were no other options. He must.

On the bright side, he'd been right that the abyss beneath the monastery's bridge led down to the Underdark!

And feather-fall had held long enough to soften their landing amidst the broken rubbish the monks had–apparently–been heaving over the side of the bridge into the dark for centuries. And while his shoulder was dislocated from the force of being hauled backwards off a bridge by the wrist, he hadn't broken any bones. Astarion, skittish, assumed once again that Wyll would strike him for having moved when Wyll was frozen, and Wyll needed to soothe and promise and pretend the pain was of no matter. It wasn't being burned alive, he reminded himself, and was thus unimportant compared to the pain he'd endured this tenday thus far.

He'd popped plenty of bones back in joints before; a healing potion and their lucky amulet managed the rest. Astarion was still staring at him with wild eyes when he returned the healing amulet to him, but at least he looked less ready to lunge out of sheer terror.

Then it was time to figure out how to handle the bodies.

The bridge was built upon a sheer rock face, the ground sloping down away from it further into the dark. Broken pottery and rotting wood and bits of bone crunched underfoot, the air damp and slightly sour with decay. Wyll took each of their dead companions under the arms and lifted them, dragged them down to the flatter bare-stone ground below. The first business was to cleanse the bodies, prestidigitation a help here in allowing his companions to keep what dignity he could offer them.

Astarion did not ask to be allowed to taste their blood. Perhaps that was a kindness he was offering Wyll. Or a sign of fear. Wyll thought it was more likely disgust at the smell. There was no such thing as a clean and tidy death, no battlefield drenched with blood without the foul smell of feces and urine and offal in its wake. Wyll used prestidigitation over and over till the shape of the spell felt like a second tongue in his mouth.

Astarion had crouched beside him as Wyll worked, curled close around himself, nails worrying at the straps of their supply pack. “Are you done yet?” He asked. “If any of those Githyanki get the idiotic idea to go over the side of the bridge into this cesspit, they’re going to land right on top of us. We should move–” he stared out into the darkness, studded with distant luminescent mushrooms like stars, “–elsewhere.”

“I’m almost done,” Wyll lied. He still hadn’t even begun thinking about how they were going to actually carry their companions. “If you want to start looking through our supplies to decide what gear you want as your share, feel free. And do you want to switch armors? I’d happily trade back for the gambeson.”

Rifling through their supplies and holding up various objects for Wyll to explain (he should have been paying more attention to Gale and Shadowheart’s discussion on the magical properties of their various finds, he couldn’t satisfy half of Astarion’s curiosity) worked to distract his anxious ally for a little while. Tragically, Astarion did not want the stomach-bared, metal-ribbed monstrosity the others had forced on Wyll.

While Astarion nicked boots and gloves and amulets off the bodies and emptied their packs to catalog, Wyll wetted a handkerchief from his waterskin and wiped clean Karlach’s face, then Shadowheart’s. Prestidigitation didn’t feel like enough, even if these were only temporary last rites.

He didn’t snap when Astarion unlaced Shadowheart’s boots and pulled them off her, hopping on one foot as he tried to swap shoes without getting his socks wet. He didn’t knock his hand away when Astarion lifted Lae’zel’s hands to pull the rings off her fingers. He reminded himself that Astarion had never believed Wyll’s allies to be *his* allies. These were just bodies to him. Corpses. Wyll had just given him permission. Wyll clenched his teeth until his jaw creaked and didn’t say anything. He was Astarion’s ally, not his jailer, he had to act like it.

Mizora had never been fooled by him freezing into rabbit-stillness when he wished she wouldn’t notice him; he’d learned to keep moving through his panic and let the Blade carry him when he needed cover.

Surely soon she would notice the hole Wyll had sunk himself into and come to gloat.

If Astarion tried to burn him out from the inside would Mizora object? His safety wasn't her business, as she'd told him that often. But the presumption might offend her. If Mizora had wanted him a mindless lemure he'd be one by now…but that didn't mean she'd go through any effort to help.

Astarion had threatened him *once*, in a moment of duress, Wyll reminded himself. Their hiding place up in the dark tower had brought back memories of–Wyll wasn't sure. Some horrible torture, a stranding, abandonment. Astarion had thought Wyll was going to hurt him, he hadn't threatened Wyll until he thought he was retaliating against a threat Wyll posed *him*.

Wyll couldn't keep thinking about this. He had to keep moving. He just had to trust that if he treated honestly, Astarion wouldn't be driven to such extremity again.

When Astarion reached for the amulet around Karlach's necklace, Wyll said: "Gently, please."

"What." Astarion squinted at him.

"We should be respectful of the dead."

Astarion squawked at that. "Since when?"

"I think it's a pretty foundational belief for most people?" Wyll tried, then gave up. "They're my responsibility. Just, gentle, please."

"You're the one who's planning on hauling them around like luggage, I wanted them cozy-safe inside their prickly little Githyanki artifact." Astarion grumbled, but he moved softly when he took the amulet off Karlach's neck. He stared at it. "Do you know what this does?"

"No clue."

While Astarion poked at their supplies, obviously antsy and wanting to pace but anchored by their arcane tether, Wyll removed Lae'zel's head from the bag. He'd packed her in a hurry, the Githyanki banners he'd torn down providing padding but no strategy behind the wrapping. She was dripping. Wyll cleaned the cloths with prestidigitation, then wiped the blood of Lae'zel's face. He had a bit of oiled cloth in his back that had been wrapped around a wedge of cheese, he bundled that around the base of her neck. Her hair was in disarray and he itched to set it to rights, to braid it and coil it away but–Astarion might explode.

Wyll wrapped her again, more carefully this time, and put her back in the bag. Then he cast Armor of Agathys on himself and slung the bag with Lae'zel's head across his back, working the straps carefully over the pointed shoulder pads on his armor.

"So how exactly are you planning to carry three people?" Astarion asked. "Karlach alone is probably heavier than we could carry together and then there's the other two. You said you'd figure it out."

Wyll considered a number of horrible options.

An elixir of Hill Giant Strength would allow his muscles to exceed their limits, but he knew well from experience that it didn't increase endurance. If he and Astarion both drank an elixir, they'd have twelve hours of being able to carry the bodies stacked between them like cordwood. They could rig a sling, maybe, out of the fabric and rope they had on hand, but that wouldn't change the fact that eventually they would run out of elixirs and be unable to journey further. And that assumed Astarion would be willing to help carry. Wyll's original vision of carrying one body over his shoulder at a time implied that he would need to circle back, and back, and back. And run out of elixirs even faster.

He pressed the heel of his hand against his brow, fighting down exhaustion. This wasn't going to work.

"We'll need a sledge, so that I can drag them." Wyll said. "Let's see whether there's any wood worth scavenging in this rubbish heap."

"Drag them! And you said I was the disrespectful one," Astarion muttered, but he helped Wyll pick over the pile in search of a conveniently discarded cart or barrow or other such conveyance. Lathander must not have approved of their mission, because the dead clerics failed to have miraculously thrown a functioning vehicle off the bridge.

They did, however, find the remains of a door. It was made of sturdy oak planks, only a bit rotted, and had iron strapping to hold it together. It would make the load even heavier, but the iron strapping gave him somewhere to loop the ropes to.

"Do we have to make…wheels?" Astarion asked, staring at it dubiously.

"Do you know how to make wheels?" Wyll asked. "Because I confess it is beyond my skill set."

"Isn't the door just going to make them heavier?" Astarion asked, because he had been put on Faerûn to torment Wyll.

Wyll threw his hands up. "I'm not going to hold them by their ankles and drag them on their backs like enemy corpses skinned behind a chariot, Astarion. What better option would you suggest?"

Astarion flinched, then recoiled from the flinch with a gap-toothed snarl. "I wouldn't try hauling three dead bodies through the Underdark by any means. This is your fool project, not mine."

"It is," Wyll agreed, exhausted. "And so I have to do it the best I can. And this is my best idea."

Astarion regarded him warily, but didn't argue further as Wyll fastened the rope to the improvised sledge and then hauled it back to where he'd laid the bodies. He rolled them into place and tied them down, testing his knots until he was sure they wouldn't shift. Astarion would be carrying most of their supplies, but Wyll slung a second pack over his front carrying his share of the essentials–food, water, elixirs, and scrolls. He kept his most

important tool in a pouch on his belt–the magnetic compass that would guide them southeast until they could arise back to the surface away from the crèche.

The elixir of hill giant strength was shudderingly awful and Wyll washed it down with as much water as he dared spare. He didn't feel any different right away, but elixirs were tricky like that.

When he stepped into the looped harness for the sledge and lifted, so that only the back edge of the door was touching the ground, he could definitely feel that he was stronger than he ought to be. He took a first step forward, the wood scraping against the stone with a noise that made Astarion's ears twitch irritably. It was heavy, even with the potion. He didn't think he could do this.

He didn't have any other choice.

"Are you the beast of burden, then?" Astarion asked, pacing alongside him as Wyll took a few staggering steps forward. "I'm not expected to participate?"

"If you want to–volunteer," Wyll said, "Feel free."

"I think I'd rather not," Astarion said.

"Then don't."

"And when you have a heart attack and keel over?"

Wyll slipped on the Blade's smile. "Well, my plan was to not do that?"

That made Astarion squawk in outrage again, which was a small thing to savor under the dire circumstances. They set out, Wyll at a grinding pace and Astarion flitting ahead of him and back again, neck on an anxious swivel like an owl's.

Astarion had slung Wyll's unstrung bow and quiver over his shoulder. Wyll wondered if he'd been inspired by the fantasy Wyll had shared, or if he simply enjoyed taking something that had been Wyll's. It made tactical sense, anyway–Wyll had eldritch blasts to hand if he needed to fight at a distance, and all the knives Astarion had claimed from their dead companions and hung from his belt would be most useful at close range. Still, he wondered if Astarion actually knew how to use a bow. There was little cause to in the city, and presumably spawn were not at liberty to take vacations. Was it stereotyping to assume Astarion would have training using a bow because he was an elf?

He'd think of a better way to ask that.

Their path took them down a shallow incline, overgrown with mosses, and Wyll's sledge thumped down it at a pace that nearly took him out at the shins. There was a gurgle of water somewhere nearby, and Wyll turned slightly towards the sound in hopes of refilling their supplies.

"Should we have a light?" Astarion asked, the ghost at Wyll's elbow. "Is it worse to have a light? Do the things down here see it and then come crawling out of the rocks to eat you?"

Was he afraid of the dark? Wyll remembered that close-cramped stone tomb, the darkness tightening around him like a constricting snake. Could he blame Astarion, if he was?

Wyll paused to catch his breath and explain. “There are quite a lot of bioluminescent mushrooms, actually. Certainly there are predators that hunt by light source, but plenty of adventurers bring a magical light with them as they travel the Underdark and emerge unharmed. But I don’t have any way of casting light, and fire is hazardous–torchstalks release flammable gasses that can make entire hollows ignite with a single spark.”

“So we’re going to wander around in the darkness,” Astarion said bleakly. “Because if we light a torch we might explode.”

There was something curling at the edge of Wyll’s tadpole, resignation and dread. Astarion’s dread, growing strong enough to taste even as he tried to hold his mind apart using Lae’zel’s lessons. He tried to think. There had to be something he could do–he didn’t want to risk a torch, but if that’s what it took to keep Astarion sane, they’d have to.

What had they done with Komira’s locket? “Did you see a round amulet in our supplies? Gold-plated brass? Red stone in the middle? One of the tieflings had given us her locket as a token of thanks, I think it allows you to cast dancing lights. If Gale’s orb didn’t eat it.”

“He better not have,” Astarion hissed, then crouched down to dig through his pack. “I can’t see colors in the dark, I don’t know if the stone was *red* but–ha!” He held up a bit of jewelry in his hand. “How do we turn it on? Do you have to shake it?”

Wyll walked him through putting the amulet on and speaking the incantation for dancing lights. The floating spheres blanketed them in color again, and with the greys washed away he could see that Astarion’s hands were shaking. But he could feel the panic ebbing, no longer pushing against his mind.

The lights orbited Astarion slowly, like a halo of light. He reached out to touch one of them, his fingers sliding through it like jelly. Astarion giggled. “Isn’t it lovely?” Astarion said. “Why do wizards not sit around and invent lovely things all the time? Why do they keep inventing spells to turn people inside-out and make their cocks explode at forty paces when they could be making *wonderful* things?”

Wyll snorted. “I don’t think the second one’s a real spell.”

“What is *shatter* if not a spell of making someone’s cock explode?” Astarion asked with a flippant wave of his hand. “If you can explode a steel wall you can explode anything, they just don’t publicize that. To cut down on the number of establishments that ban wizards outright.” He popped back up, looking around into the darkness beyond the pooling light. “You’re sure the lights aren’t going to draw every carnivorous beast to our doorstep? I hate being eaten.”

The bigger concern was the dead bodies, but Wyll didn’t want to be the first one to mention that. The smell wouldn’t become perceptible to people for a day or two, but there were scavengers in the dark that had a keener sense for rot. “Most creatures in the Underdark don’t

hunt by sight," Wyll said. "And I'm not going to let anything eat you." He started moving again, the rumble of the sledge over rock deafening in the sudden quiet.

"And it doesn't matter whether we have lights, because anything that wants to eat us would hear the ruckus you're making from a mile away. Wonderful. Great," Astarion said.

They walked in silence for what was probably only a few minutes before coming to the stream that Wyll had heard. It was just a narrow rivulet cutting through rock with nothing else to forage, but Wyll still stopped to refill his waterskins. He hadn't inventoried their food stocks, but he knew it wouldn't be much–they'd packed for a day trip, not a long march. But the luxury of plentiful food and cooked meals hadn't become so familiar that he'd forgotten how to do without. He'd get by.

Astarion couldn't stay silent for long. He kept asking questions as they walked–what creatures were there in the Underdark? How did they hunt? How many legs did they have? How big were they?

Wyll was glad that Astarion wasn't too frightened of him to make conversation. He understood that the Underdark was frightening, if you weren't confident in your abilities in the wilderness. But Astarion wasn't hauling a sledge and three times his body-mass and thus had considerably more spare breath for making conversation than Wyll did.

"Why don't you tell me something?" Wyll gasped eventually, in self-defense.

Astarion looked at him warily. "What do you want to know?"

Anything. Literally anything if Astarion would stop asking him questions. Wyll mopped his face on his sleeve, his eyes stinging from sweat. The waistband of his armor was beginning to soak through, and he was glad it left his core exposed even in the cool air of the Underdark. He was hot as a forge and his head was pounding like a blade beneath a blacksmith's hammer. "Have you ever used a bow?" he asked.

"I must have," Astarion said. "Elves learn archery as good little elflings, don't they? I assume I must have at some point. But I don't remember things from before–"

The grit-worm taste in his mouth, choking him, as he clawed his way up though the dirt that had been laid over his grave, his hands broken from clawing the wooden top of his casket to splinters and–

Wyll flinched from Astarion's memory and Astarion flinched back, the memory cutting off violently, like a page torn from a book and crumpled. When Wyll looked up, Astarion was standing very still, the orbiting lights casting long shadows across his face. "That was an accident," Astarion said. "I wasn't trying to get into your head."

Breathing deeply, Wyll tried to enjoy the taste of damp air. Redolent with the wet-green taste of the Underdark in bloom. Tried to enjoy the way his lungs could expand fully, how he wasn't panicking, and he wasn't buried and Astarion wasn't trying to crush his mind. "I know," he said. "I think our parasites have decided they like each other."

Astarion shuddered. “How dreadful. I’ll try harder to keep it leashed,” he said. The *‘for now’* was entirely in Wyll’s head. Astarion wasn’t threatening him. He was specifically offering to keep his mind to himself, which was the opposite of threatening Wyll.

If Astarion knew how to hit him with a weapon he’d be less tempted to use the tadpole, Wyll thought in a moment of exhaustion-edged conviction. He didn’t want to waste any of the time he had before the elixir wore off, but he could sit and rest for a minute while he showed Astarion how to string the bow and place his fingers and aim it off into the dark ahead of them. The dancing lights worked perfectly as a target if Astarion sent them on ahead.

Astarion likely had done it before, his hands finding their place more easily than Wyll would expect from a beginner. It was a shortbow, luckily, and Astarion had the strength to draw it, though not all the way and the arrows landed far short of his initial target. His aim was horrible.

Still, it gave him something to do. He’d fire off an arrow towards one of the orbs of light, then pluck it back up when Wyll’s pace finally let him get close enough to grab it. Then repeat. His aim got better and the glancing brushes of tomb-dark thoughts were no longer sending shivers up Wyll’s spine. A win all around, except that eventually Astarion got bored and started asking questions again.

“Some of us have to breathe to walk,” Wyll gasped. He could feel his pulse in his fingertips from the way his heart was pounding, and his lungs were burning fit to burst.

“Then stop walking and answer the question,” Astarion said, flippantly twirling the arrow in his hand.

Wyll paused, took a drink, tried to catch his breath so he could explain: “The elixir only lasts twelve hours. We only have three of them. Any time I spend not pulling now is time we’ll have to move the bodies *without* the elixir.”

Astarion stared at him in horror. “You’re planning on walking for another–what? Ten hours? Until the potion wears off or you drop dead? Are we on a death march, Wyll?”

“We don’t have time to argue,” Wyll said.

“Elixir or no, you aren’t going to make it. Twelve hours. By all the cocksucking gods and goddesses, are you *insane*?”

There weren’t any other options. Wyll shrugged. “What would you have me do?”

“Not abandon me in the Underdark, for one,” Astarion said. “Which is what’s going to happen when your heart explodes. You were on bed rest *yesterday* and you were on fire the day before. Elixirs don’t make you immortal.”

There was that fear again, ghosting around the edges of his mind. They’d fucked something up, the way their tadpoles kept trying to connect without either of them willing it. Wyll worried he knew when it had happened, that it was the long fall towards Nessus that had spun them together and every time they’d connected since the fragile borders of Wyll’s mind grew

weaker. Bowing to Astarion's demand to show him Wyll's honesty was a mistake, even if he'd been terrified of Astarion's threats. What if Astarion overrode him by accident, what if they couldn't untangle themselves?

Knowing Astarion was afraid didn't change the truth–that they had a long distance to walk, that they'd be going slow because of the sledge and that Wyll needed every minute of time he could get with the elixirs. But he couldn't push Astarion too far either, not if he wanted to be safe from him.

"Let me go as far as I can," Wyll asked him. "That's all I ask. As far as I can."

"From a self-sacrificing idiot like you, that's probably to the point where you've worn your feet off and are stumbling forward on bloody stumps that used to be your ankles," Astarion said. "But fine. I understand. I'll shut up."

"You could talk about yourself," Wyll said.

Astarion barked a laugh. "What would I tell you? Do you think I know things? I have it on good authority that I'm an empty-headed creature, Blade of Frontiers. There's nothing useful and nothing beautiful in here," he said, tapping his finger against his forehead. "Nothing a person like you would want to hear."

"I don't think that's true."

"Well you're an idiot," Astarion said.

They went on in silence, or as close to silence as they could get over Wyll panting for breath and his thundering heart and the grating sound of the sledge against stone. Astarion started to speak, several times, and each time stopped himself with a curl of his lip and a glare in Wyll's direction. Wyll tried to think of something to say as a defense against Astarion's irritation, but it was getting harder and harder to think of anything besides:

Left foot. Right foot. Ceiling growing low, try to stoop so the horns don't hit a stalactite. Left foot. Right foot. Ignore the burning pain in his palms, there'd be time to deal with blisters later. Left foot. Right–

The world blinked black and Wyll found himself on his knees, the rope slack in his hands. "Sorry," he said, stupidly. He pushed himself to his feet again, but there was a whining noise in his ears that didn't want to go away. Wyll hit the side of his head, trying to dislodge it.

"Why don't you sit down before you faint again?" Astarion's voice asked, high with pain–no, not pain. That was panic. Wyll didn't want Astarion to panic. He sat back down. Things did seem better on the ground, even if the moss was wet and started seeping through his breeches immediately.

Astarion crouched in front of him, waving his hand in front of Wyll's nose. "Are you awake?"

"Yeah," Wyll said.

“We’re stopping,” Astarion said. “My feet are killing me. I cannot possibly go on. We’re just going to have to make camp here.”

“Camp,” Wyll said. He thought about their supplies. They’d left the tents and bedrolls in their supply cache where he’d sent Lady Esther off the cliff. “We don’t have tents.”

“I noticed.” Astarion said dryly. “Nonetheless, you are going to eat something and lie down and be unconscious for a while. And I am going to not be unconscious. Because someone should be on watch.”

“I’ll take next shift,” Wyll said.

“Of course you will, darling.”

Wyll had intended to forage for supplies before making camp. He’d intended to find a spot with good sightlines and dry ground and explain to Astarion exactly what to watch for in the dark.

He’d intended–

Wyll woke up with rough boards digging into his back and his muscles frozen stiff with pain. When he cracked his eye open, he found that he’d been placed on the sledge next to the bodies, one of the packs slipped under his head to lift the horns off the ground. Karlach’s pain-stricken face was next to his, the eyes he’d closed so gently unable to disguise the horror she’d felt at death. The pack with Lae’zel’s head was lying next to him. He swallowed against the nausea and tried to get up.

Tried.

“You’re not dead then,” Astarion said coolly as Wyll tried for the second time to get his throbbing back to cooperate and let him sit. The metal ribs of his armor had dug into his spine all night; he probably had bruises. Wyll swiveled his neck to find that Astarion was sitting on a rock off to the side, bow balanced on his knee. There were deep-carved circles under his eyes and a wild look to them.

“I need a healing potion,” Wyll said.

“You need to give up,” Astarion said. “But you won’t! Obviously you won’t. So let’s keep being stupid.”

Astarion fetched him a healing potion and the amulet; he had to hold Wyll’s head up to help him drink it. Wyll tried not to flinch away from him, to keep himself exactly as relaxed as a man yielding to the irritable care and attentions of his ally ought to be. He thought he saw something in the flicker of Astarion’s eyes anyway, and the shame curled up tighter in his chest, like a kicked dog hiding its face in the back of an alley somewhere. He wasn’t allowed to be afraid, he needed to trust Astarion. The man had done nothing to hurt him–

The tendril of power worming in, familiar, overpowering, from hands splayed across his face as his muscles loosened and his face grew slack and stupid. "There, puppy," she said, "Won't it be easier when everything is like this?"

Lae'zel pulling him away from Astarion and the sweet-tasting certainty that the only thing he wanted was to loosen the ropes that held the vampire in their camp. The familiar wrong-wrong-wrong revulsion rushing through him with shuddering clarity as he realized he'd been made a puppet again.

Astarion had done nothing to hurt him now that they'd agreed to be allies, Wyll reminded himself solidly. He'd complained, and he'd needled Wyll, and he'd watched with disdain as Wyll attempted to haul their allies across the Underdark alone. But he hadn't hurt Wyll–his hand on the back of Wyll's neck was practically tender.

Wyll remembered, belatedly, the promise he'd made in the crèche and another reason why Astarion might want to keep him alive and whole. "We didn't find you anything to drink," he said, "Did you need to–"

Astarion's face fell into stillness, but Wyll could feel the tremor in his hand against Wyll's neck. "I–" Astarion pulled his hand away, pulled them both close to his body. "I don't *need*. I ate only yesterday, you remember. Feeding me would weaken you further, and then when you die in the Underdark I'll have no way of finding my way out. So I don't *need* as bad as all that."

Pure tactics. Not because Astarion cared about Wyll, because he needed him. Still, Wyll had made a promise and now Astarion was the one denying himself half of the bargain. "We'll find you something. For now, would it be better to have a taste, if that was all I could spare?"

Astarion's eyes glinted red, reflecting the glow of the dancing lights, and he shook his head. "I don't think you know your limits, Saer Blade. I'd rather not have you collapse into my arms again like the actor of a tragic drama finally overcome by consumption."

The shame raised its head and howled that even Astarion, with greed in his eyes and fingers clenched on his sleeves, wouldn't make use of Wyll. Wyll shushed it, and drank his elixir, and they started out again.

Wyll tried harder to pace himself this time, even as the hourglass of the elixirs trickled sand towards the failure of his plan.

He stopped to point out mushrooms as they went, identifying tinmask and torchstalks at a distance, harvesting fleshy and bulging ripplebark and cutting it into strips to eat later when they came across a patch of it. A good find, even if it was unappetizing raw, pungent with the whiff of rot. They passed a handful of giant fire beetles foraging on mosses, but Astarion said he'd rather not indulge in bug ichor. He preferred his blood warm.

Astarion complained frequently that his legs ached, and they'd stop to rest so he could lie down, though Wyll wasn't sure if Astarion was telling the truth or trying to keep Wyll from collapsing again. Other than that, the man was silent within his halo of light, though Wyll would see his mouth moving, like he'd think of things to say and just not voice them with

any air. He wanted, badly, to try to coax Astarion back into conversation, anything to escape the spiraling thoughts clamoring in his head. But he couldn't pull and talk both.

Even with food in his belly and the elixir in his veins, Wyll knew he was flagging. They must have found their way to an old Duergar wagon-trail, because he'd spotted ruts in the stone from the metal wheels of rothé wagons, and they hadn't yet reached any abysses or cliffs that needed to be scaled on their hands and knees.

But even on the slow inclines of the trail Wyll found himself pausing to gasp for air, his legs and back twitching at the brink of collapse. He wasn't going to make it.

On one hill, the sledge started to slide backwards and Astarion had to grab onto the rope to stop Wyll from being dragged down the hill with it. They made it to the top slow as snails, Astarion walking backwards with his hands bracketing Wyll's as Wyll tried to push forwards and take as much weight as he could. Astarion didn't say anything on the grim climb, but Wyll could see the tension in his neck, the clenched jaw, the effort it was taking to stop Wyll from succumbing to his weakness.

"We'll take another break," Wyll said at the top, before Astarion could point out the obvious. "Recover our strength. Thank you, Astarion."

"You could order me to help you," Astarion said, the question in his voice clearly asking why Wyll didn't. He rubbed his hands together where the rope must have dug in, even with the leather gauntlets.

"I'm not your jailer," Wyll said. "We're allies. That means I have no right to force you to take on my burdens."

Astarion stared at him blankly. "You believe that."

"I mean things when I say them," Wyll said. "And besides, we don't have an elixir to spare for you, and someone ought to have a hand free for a weapon if we need it."

"Would have made far more sense to make me be the one dragging the bodies so that you could be the one with the sword and bow," Astarion said.

"And would you have? Willingly?"

Astarion stared at him. "Why should that have anything to do with it? You succeeded in trapping me down here, and my only way out is through you. You could order me to do anything you wanted, my only other choice is to stay–" *the shiver of fear, stone walls pressing in on every side* "–and rot."

"We're allies," Wyll said, "and I didn't take us to the Underdark to force you to do my bidding. I know you'd rather have stayed on the surface, but it really was a tactical choice. We've had no sign of pursuers."

Astarion made a skeptical noise, but abandoned the argument. Wyll felt a flare of annoyance that still–*still!*–Astarion didn't trust that Wyll wasn't going to turn on him at the slightest

provocation and reveal himself a slaver. That even letting Astarion into his head to witness his intentions and embarrassing fantasy, even being tangled up in Wyll's consciousness in the hells hadn't been enough to make Astarion believe him.

Maybe there was something rotten inside of him that Wyll couldn't see. Maybe Astarion had sniffed out that rot. Maybe that was the problem. Maybe Wyll was in denial. How many times could a person make decisions that hurt people and call them mistakes?

Forever, if he had to, because Wyll wasn't going to lie down and stop trying to be good. He didn't get to stop trying. He had too much to make up for.

They didn't make it much further before Astarion spotted something up ahead in the dark and called for another halt. They left the sledge and approached warily, till they were close enough to identify what must have been a Duergar wagon whose owner had met some nasty end. Hard to tell from what, the scavengers had picked his bones almost clean. Wyll's heart leapt with excitement before he realized that one of the cart wheels was broken, sheared off its axle, the entire thing warped to one side.

After Astarion discovered the dead Duergar was no good for eating, he started rifling through the remains of their pockets. He came back with a handful of jewelry, none of it obviously enchanted, and another knife. "Nothing good," Astarion commented before waving Wyll over so he could check the back of the wagon.

There were several large barrels in the back, marked as wine. "If only we were up on the surface, this could have been our lucky day," Astarion said. "We could have drunk our weight in wine and been drunk as shit when we turned into squids, which I think is the best possible scenario there."

That would indeed have been very tempting, if Wyll didn't have obligations. "We'll raise a glass together eventually," Wyll said. "And I suppose a small sip couldn't hurt–it'll only go to waste here in the dark."

Astarion was looking at one of the barrels with a strange look on his face. He leaned over and hugged it, his arms not quite meeting all the way around. "I'm having an idea that you're going to hate," Astarion announced. "What if we put the bodies in barrels?"

"What."

"Dragging that damned door is a lot harder than rolling a cart. This cart is broken, and I don't think either of us could fix it. But! Barrels are round. If we popped the top off three of these, we could put the bodies inside and then be able to roll them along. Assuming that rigor mortis has softened up enough to get them folded up inside. That would be much less work on the downhills and, well, I don't know. Still probably less work than hauling all three of them at once on the uphill bits?"

"Astarion, we are not jamming our allies' bodies into barrels like they are pickled herrings! It's not–"

“Sufficiently dignified?” Astarion suggested. “Surely once you’ve resurrected them they’d be willing to forgive a little indignity if it got them to their destination. Or we could not tell them. Let’s not tell them. Except maybe Karlach, she’d think it was funny.”

Karlach *would* think it was funny. Wyll wished desperately that she were there to tell him what to do. He wished she were there at all. It shouldn’t be possible to miss a person so much after knowing them for such a short amount of time, but Karlach wasn’t a possible sort of person.

“Let me think,” Wyll said. “And let’s bring the bodies over so we can keep an eye on them.”

He tried to force down his instant revulsion at the idea–he might not respect the gods, but the dead were sacrosanct. They didn’t count as dead if they’d soon be alive again, he tried to reassure himself. Would Astarion’s idea actually work?

On flat ground, yes, it would definitely be easier to move them. On downhills–the possibility of losing one of them over the edge of a cliff or a barrel shattering at the bottom of a steep hill and spilling Lae’zel out with all her bones broken made his stomach turn over. Any uphill would certainly be worse, though if they tied a rope harness around the barrel they could drag it the way they dragged the sledge. More importantly, they might still be able to move them after their last strength elixir was consumed.

“So?” Astarion asked, eagerly climbing back into the wagon after their task was done to poke at the supply crate that was behind the driver’s seat. “You’ve thought about it. Oh, nice, someone bothered to pack themselves a bedroll. And even a pillow! The blankets are a bit short, but that’s gnomes for you. Always inconsiderate.”

“I think it’s–” he sent up a mental plea for forgiveness “–it’s worth trying. We’d have to be careful, but we can’t count on being able to follow this wagon track forever. If we have to travel uneven ground for any distance, we’d have to leave the sledge behind anyway. Better to be prepared for that. We’ll try Karlach first, see if we can get her to fit. And if we can get the top ring off the barrels. Usually you need a hammer for that.”

“You could just blast through it, couldn’t you?” Astarion asked, miming the somatic gesture for an eldritch blast. “Actually, wait. You pushed that granny off the cliff the other day–”

“–please never say it like that again,” Wyll said, sitting down so he could lean his forehead against his knees.

“You pushed that *horrible backstabbing old woman* off the cliff the other day, using your warlock cantrip. Could you use that to push the barrels? Could you eldritch blast them all the way to the other side of the Underdark?”

Wyll was going to discover a new type of headache previously unknown to humanity. “I could eldritch blast our dead allies, yes, if I wanted to send them flying into the darkness and shatter the barrels,” Wyll said.

“No control over your strength?” Astarion said, making a disapproving noise in his throat. “I hear that from men all the time. You should work on that, having a gentle touch can be

useful."

"Magic from the hells doesn't like being gentle," Wyll said. "And it's apt to be disobedient when you force it to do things it doesn't like doing."

Astarion scoffed. "Why did you sign on to be a warlock? You'd have been better off as a–I don't know. A paladin? One of those fantasy prince archetypes."

"I cannot speak of my pact," Wyll said. "But it was worth the price."

"The price being your soul and eventual eternal torment? That really does narrow down the possibilities," Astarion said. "You can't *speak* of the pact. Does your fell mistress forbid clues? Charades?" He paused, and Wyll assumed he was trying to think of an even more ludicrous joke when he said: "I can hear something breathing."

Wyll sat up, putting his hand to the hilt of his sword. "Where?"

"Over there," Astarion pointed, before ducking behind the side of the wagon and slipping the bow off his shoulder. He sniffed, mouth slightly open like he was a snake scenting the air. "Warm blooded. Animal, I think, I hear hooves."

"Not a lot of predators with hooves," Wyll said. *Not zero, of course.* He slipped off the back of the wagon, but couldn't actually come along the side for a better view because Astarion hadn't moved and the damned spell was still tying them together. Still, he was able to spy the floating blue lights and then the deep rothé that had summoned them as it ambled its way around the rocky outcropping. The animal had a matted pelt and deep scars where the harness for a cart would have sat, and Wyll suspected he knew which cart it had once pulled. Still, its lights were a placid blue.

"It's a rothé," Wyll said. "Harmless unless we antagonize it. They communicate using dancing lights, it probably saw your lights and came over to see if there was another rothé."

"Dinner?" Astarion asked.

Wyll hesitated. "Maybe. Let's try diplomacy first. The Duergar breed rothés for hauling cargo, it could do a better job carrying the bodies than either of us."

Wyll went through his supplies and found the one precious potion of animal speaking. The rothé snuffled at the dead Duergar, then came up to Wyll and pushed its warm nose against his chest. The rothé didn't even come up to his shoulders, but it was built of pure muscle, its green horns thick with age. Wyll drank the potion.

"Horned one," the rothé lowed, "have you also killed your masters? I see their bodies."

He meant Karlach and Lae'zel and Shadowheart. Wyll shook his head. "No, no, those are my friends. I bring them to a place where they can rest."

"I grieve your loss. I had friends once, when I was a calf. Before the branding and the whips and the harnesses," the rothé said. Then, with an air of disapproval, "Your white-haired friend speaks lights and colors they do not understand."

“Forgive him,” Wyll said, “he was not raised among rothés, but up on the surface. He misses the light there.”

“Hmm.” The rothé stared at Astarion, who looked inches from either heaving himself out of the cart and running or throwing himself at the rothé and slitting her throat. “You are traveling far, then? I would travel alongside. It is safer in herds.”

“We would be honored,” Wyll said, “Though I do not know your speech except by magic, and this spell will wear off within the day. You must teach me how to understand your light-speech.”

“For one with such magnificent horns, you know very little, surface creature,” the rothé told him.

It took only a little negotiation to get the rothé–her name was spelled out via a wobbling dance of orange lights in a diamond pattern–to agree to carry the bodies. They had to sacrifice the Duergar’s blankets to make a set of slings to drape over her back, Lae’zel and Shadowheart on one side and Karlach on the other to make the weights balance.

Astarion was clearly irritated that he couldn’t snack on the rothé and that Wyll asked him to give back Komira’s locket so he could practice communicating with Wobbling-Orange-Diamond. And then further irritated that Wyll took a break for Wobbling-Orange-Diamond to graze on the ormu moss that grew by a clear stream she’d spotted while Wyll filled up his waterskins.

“Look,” Wyll said, once he’d retreated with Astarion back to the wagon where the bodies were waiting. “She’s going to carry the bodies for us, that’s hard work. She needs to eat first. But if he’s carrying them…there’s no reason you couldn’t feed too. Just a little, I still need to be able to walk.”

Astarion went loose and languid, all the tension in his body falling away at Wyll’s suggestion. “Oh, so it’s only sweet little cows that I’m not allowed to eat,” he said. “I was a trifle worried there that you preferred the company of herbivores. Well, if you’re offering.”

Wyll decided not to mention that he was fairly sure that ‘sweet little cow’ had kicked her slaver in the head till he died and then eaten some of him. That wouldn’t help Astarion sleep–trance!–at night, and it wasn’t as if Wobbling-Orange-Diamond would have any cause to turn on them like that. Wyll would just keep an eye on things and make sure Astarion wasn’t tempted to take out any frustrations on the rothé. “I offered this morning. I keep telling you I’m not going to change my mind,” Wyll said.

He used a knife to nick his arm and held it up for Astarion. The vampire gripped his wrist with cautious, cold-fingered hands.

“Not the neck, then?” Astarion asked casually, watching the blood come up to the surface and puddle there. “Too intimate?”

“I’m not quite stupid enough to try and non-lethally slit my own throat,” Wyll said. “It’s all the same blood, I’m sure the wrist will do. Bon appetit.”

Astarion approached the task slowly. Cradling Wyll's wrist in his hands and leaning forward to breathe deeply, as if savoring the taste in the air. Then he licked Wyll's skin, fingers tightening as his saliva spread cool numbness across Wyll's wrist. Finally, he folded himself around Wyll's wrist, lips sealing around the cut like a kiss, tongue probing and pushing at the cut as he swallowed eagerly.

Astarion made a low noise in the back of his throat, like a moan. He hadn't done that when he'd drunk from the dead Githyanki. He *had* done that when he was licking Wyll's face. His ears twitched, like a moth trapped between cupped palms. Wyll tried to keep himself perfectly rigid and pretended he hadn't noticed.

It was just–people didn't touch him. *Mizora* touched him. The Blade kept to himself. Didn't overstay his welcome, didn't take allies, didn't seek care unless his mistress gave permission.

He could go long aching months without brushing hands with anyone. He'd linger in his bedroll at night over the clasped hands of dancers at a village revel, a cleric's palm pressed against his broken leg, the casual shove of a drinker in an over-full tavern. The touch of a merchant when he passed coin into their outstretched hands. He could pretend that he didn't want touch more than air when Mizora came calling to taunt him, tempt him, lay claim to her property. Because he didn't want her touch.

But he *wanted*.

And Balduran's bones preserve him, it had always seemed easier not to fantasize about people. People were what he couldn't have, not while he was tethered to Mizora, not when he was fated down to the hells. But he'd been seventeen when he was first banished, and the fantasies of flesh could not be as thoroughly exorcised as he'd have liked. Wyll told himself he would never think of *her*, and then he promised himself that he'd never lead an innocent into her grasp. Even faceless strangers dreamt up on a whim felt indecent after that–like Wyll was sullying them, risking them. It ruined the mood.

He'd fantasized about monsters. Mermaids, mostly! Not vampires, he'd never given much thought to vampires. The spawn he'd fought had been too real, too tragic–his fantasies tended to wither once he'd seen a given monster's victims laid out for burial. But till that happened, monsters were an easy thing to think about: something that might want him only for his flesh, something that Mizora would mock him for but not deny him. Not what he wanted, not something he could have, but something he could imagine without feeling so guilty that it killed all arousal.

He was regretting ever having picked up a book with a mermaid on the cover.

His mind still thought it was safe, fantasizing about monsters. Dreaming of scenarios where anonymous creatures with long claws (Astarion's fingernails were neatly trimmed) and fangs (unfortunately pulled, his blunt teeth politely tucked away beneath his lips) and immense strength (not so far) wanted nothing more than to touch him, taste him, devour him. Where what Wyll wanted didn't matter, so he didn't need to feel guilty about wanting anything.

It had been a very simple system until Astarion started sucking on his arm and making indecent noises about it.

Wyll's pulse raced, a warm flush spreading down his chest and then…further, where his breeches were about to become very uncomfortable in a way Astarion was sure to notice even in the dark. The fact that the breeches for this damned armor fastened with a buckle shaped like a bullseye right over his crotch made everything worse. It was all just pattern recognition. He'd gone and trained himself like a dog (Mizora would never stop laughing if she knew) to respond to this exact scenario as if he were the heroine of a dirty copper novel swooning as she was ravished.

He tried to tame himself by imagining exactly what Mizora would say if she were to notice him in this position. Not just the humiliating words she'd have for Wyll, that wasn't enough. The way she'd sneer at Astarion like he was some repulsive thing. She'd leered at Wyll once already and implied Astarion was something to be used and Wyll was an animal who would do that. And Wyll was smart enough to connect the dots and guess what Cazador Szarr had been forcing Astarion to do for a very long time. Another reason why Wyll would never impose.

Mizora would show up, and she'd taunt Wyll and try to make something disgusting out of giving Astarion sustenance.

Wyll imagined firing back at her. Telling her that he wasn't ashamed to have Astarion touch him. That, despite her many attempts, he still remembered what decency was, and decency meant making sure no one went without. Wyll wouldn't freeze up, not even if Mizora started spilling secrets to Astarion; Astarion already knew the shape of the worst of it. He was the one person who couldn't be surprised by it.

Wyll's breath caught in his throat as he realized that. It didn't make it any less awful to fantasize about Astarion, knowing what he'd done to him. But that he might be the only person Wyll wouldn't have to *tell*…who, even more, might understand. The want that was coursing through Wyll at that thought wasn't even lust, it was sheer childish fantasy.

But Astarion was already lifting his mouth away from Wyll's wrist. "Are you alright, darling?" Astarion asked. "You made a noise."

"I'm fine," Wyll said. "You can keep going, if you're still hungry."

Astarion hummed. "You shouldn't say things like that, Wyll. We still haven't determined if it's possible for me to *not* be hungry. And I need you alive right now. And I'm not going to explain to your new cow friend what's happened if you faint for the second day in a row." Astarion licked Wyll's wrist one final time and then released Wyll so he could put pressure on the cut. What control! Nothing like the spawn Wyll had fought before, unable to stop themselves from glutting themselves on each villager they'd been able to grab.

"Well if you'd like something to wash it down, we could tap one of the barrels and enjoy a bit of wine," Wyll suggested.

"That's like proposing washing down honey with vinegar," Astarion said, hopping off the cart. "Everything that does not sustain a vampire tastes dreadful. Vampirism is a wretched curse."

Still, he helped Wyll tap one of the barrels to get at a bit of the deep red alcohol that turned out not to be wine at all but fermented fire-lichen spirits. The heat was enough to send Wyll flat on his back coughing and Astarion into hysterical laughter. Wyll didn't consider himself a slouch when it came to heat tolerance, but the Duergar had clearly figured out the trick to consuming alcohol in moderation: they simply made it impossible to drink too much without dying.

It didn't cut the lingering headache from the absence of wine, but Wyll was fairly sure making a spectacle of himself choking on his drink had kept Astarion from noticing how he'd been affected by Astarion's mouth on his wrist.

The rest of the day's journey was spent in conversation with Wobbling-Orange-Diamond or, as Astarion insisted on calling the rothé, 'Better Gale'.

"It can do magic, it talks incessantly and thinks about nothing but food all day," Astarion explained. "But the cow is better than Gale because it's not about to blow up on us or, hopefully, consume any magic items."

The nickname made Wyll think about Gale, and the fact they'd abandoned him. That Gale might be, even then, transforming into a mindflayer. He hated it. But his attempts to suggest other names were utterly unsuccessful.

Astarion was clearly spiteful about the fact that Wyll was ignoring him in favor of working with Wobbling-Orange-Diamond to learn the patterns of dancing-lights speech so they could still communicate once the potion wore off. But this was Wyll's only chance to develop a series of signs and signals with Wobbling-Orange-Diamond, so Astarion would simply have to deal with it. Wobbling referred to Astarion exclusively as "Fluffy Top", a fact that Wyll would not mention in the interest of diplomacy.

They settled down to camp near another low-lying stream where lichen grew thick and plentiful for grazing. Wyll's head was thick with exhaustion by the time they settled in. At least this time he'd planned ahead.

They'd passed some trillimac mushrooms earlier on the path, and he'd knocked down some of the thick leathery caps to use as makeshift sleeping pads, so at least they wouldn't be wet. And Astarion had taken the Duergar's pillow and woolen bedroll to lay on top.

Wyll scouted half-heartedly for nearby torchstalk mushrooms and, not finding any, allowed himself the luxury of a small fire to roast the ripplebark strips before he ate them. They were still chewy and cloyingly iron-rich, but at least cooking covered up most of the taste of rot. And he knew from experience that, cooked, they tended to cause fewer digestive emergencies. Astarion had been uncommonly kind in pretending he wasn't there whenever Wyll had to stop and relieve himself–when Wyll's pants were around his ankles and Astarion was staring into the middle distance with his arms crossed, three feet away from him, Wyll did resent Gale just a bit. And then felt guilty for it, because if it weren't for his poor leadership, Gale would be alive to have lifted the spell already.

It would break sometime in the night, assuming that Wyll was right and it was almost evening on the surface. And then…he thought Astarion would stay with him, if only from fear of the Underdark. They both needed the artifact's protection though, and there'd be nothing stopping Astarion from trying to make off with it once they were topside except fear of Githyanki ambush. A thing for Wyll to worry about in the future, when he was less exhausted and faint from blood loss and wobbly from fire-lichen spirits.

Astarion told him to take first rest, and Wyll insisted that this time Astarion must wake him to take his turn, because even an elf couldn't continue on forever with no rest. Astarion seemed perplexed by this, but he swore that he would. If he didn't, Wyll would simply make them stay in camp after he woke till Astarion had rested to his satisfaction. If Astarion was to play their primary scout and archer, he needed to be alert enough to make his targets. And, more importantly, if they were to be partners then Astarion's rest was just as important as Wyll's.

The bodies were left safely between their sleeping mats and the pile of lichens where Wobbling would bed down to sleep once she was done grazing. Everything was as safe as it could be. Wyll crawled out of his armor and into his comfortable sleep-shirt, then wished Astarion a good night and fell immediately unconscious. Which was the best endorsement for vampiric blood donation he'd thought of yet.

In his dream, Karlach wrapped her hands around his neck and squeezed, her thumbs cold as ice against the thudding desperation of his pulse. Her face was eaten through by maggots and her swollen belly ripe with decomposition. "Thought you were willing to give yourself for me, Wyll," she said. "You were supposed to die for me."

"I would have," he promised, voiceless through her strangling grasp. "I would have."

"You were the monster," she said, "out of us, you were the one who was supposed to die. And now you've replaced me, haven't you? You've given up on me. You're lusting after a different dead body. I'm cool enough to touch now, Wyll. If you like 'em dead, come taste your fill."

She dragged him closer and the stench of rot became overpowering, the foulness of decay bringing tears to his eyes. Gods, he hadn't meant to. He hadn't meant to fall for either of them, but of course they'd both be disgusted at his attraction. He needed to repent, however Karlach needed him to. "You can kill me," he said soundlessly into the leather of her pants. "I understand."

"Wyll!" Astarion screamed, and Wyll's eyes flew open. The rot-thick stench didn't vanish into the dream. The gorge rose in his throat as he rolled onto his belly, grabbing for the sword beside him. The rothé bellowed in anger.

Wyll lurched to his feet to see Wobbling strike out against an enormous carrion crawler with her front hooves, driving it away from the bodies. The monstrosity was at least twice Wyll's height, like an enormous pale-yellow centipede. Its poisonous tentacles wriggled and dripped, tasting for prey on the air. As Wyll drew his sword, another one of Astarion's arrows shot past it.

Fuck.

Wyll had promised Astarion that most predators in the Underdark didn't hunt by light. And that was true. Most of them didn't. But carrion crawlers *did*, and once it had been lured close by the lights, the decomposing bodies would be irresistible to it. The monster wouldn't leave till it was dead or had dragged off one of the bodies to feast on.

Wyll threw out an eldritch blast, knocking into the carrion crawler. It barely moved, its bulk greater than the hellish power Wyll could muster. Going in with the sword was suicide unless he could dodge the paralytic tentacles. He tried again, firing off eldritch blasts as quickly as he could while Astarion reloaded and shot off arrow after arrow, most of them pinging off the chitinous armor.

The monster swung its head towards Astarion, then towards Wyll. A ripple of motion flowed through its legs, preparing to charge.

Wyll missed his higher potency infernal spells and summons acutely. But he needed to do something to slow it down–gritting his teeth and damning the parasite inside of him, he attempted to draw up the hunger of Hadar. The spell wavered, and the carrion crawler flung itself forward, almost escaping the rising sphere of darkness. Wyll hung onto his concentration as ice crackled across the carrion crawler's armor and it screamed in pain.

"What the fuck is that?" Astarion screeched.

"A carrion crawler! Don't let it touch you," Wyll yelled.

"I meant your portal to the abyss!"

"Hunger of Hadar, it's–portal to the abyss is close enough. Don't get in the darkness, try to push it back and keep it there."

"Great," Astarion hissed. "I don't think it gives a shit about arrows, Wyll."

"Look for one of the enchanted ones!" Wyll tried to think. "Copper cone on the front, reed basket lacing it onto the shaft. Arrow of roaring thunder, that should work." He knotted his concentration around the spell while throwing off a weakened eldritch blast.

Wobbling lowed anxiously, stamping their hooves as they stood between the bodies and the shuddering sphere of blackness. Somewhere inside, the carrion crawler was coiled, blind and readying to retreat or strike.

"How am I supposed to shoot it when I can't see the thing?" Astarion asked. Darkvision couldn't penetrate the aura of Hadar.

"Shoot the darkness!" Wyll told him. But just then the carrion crawler lunged towards the bodies. Its tentacles snapped out towards Wobbling and the rothé shied back, allowing it to wrap its legs around Karlach.

Wyll threw himself forward, concentration on the hunger falling as he bound his rapier and slashed at the legs holding Karlach's body against its belly. If it got her, it would eat her, and

then there'd be no resurrection possible. Wyll ducked as its great head swung down to swipe at him with its tentacle.

Then the world went white as something popped past his left ear. Rock slammed into the side of his head. No. He slammed into the rock. He should have kept the armor on to sleep. The carrion crawler was knocked down as well, legs writhing as it flipped itself back upright. There was blood dripping down his neck from where his eardrum had popped.

Astarion's thunder arrow. Wyll had run right out in front of where he'd told Astarion to shoot.

The carrion crawler had dropped Karlach, but it righted itself faster than Wyll could get himself to his knees. Everything was doubled, a thousand legs turned two thousand as the crawler charged him, tentacles lashing. A strike of ice-cold poison caught him across the face and Wyll went down.

Wyll tried to drag himself away, but the poison was spreading fast. His arms collapsed under him. "Mizora," he said into the silence. She'd rescued him before, when she was at risk of losing a valuable tool to some stupidly ignominious death.

A cold hand closed around the hilt of Wyll's sword and pulled it away from him. Astarion swung wildly at the carrion crawler, severing half its tentacles in one stroke and then stabbing towards its neck. He was quick as a snake, lunging backwards away from the carrion crawler's next strike, leading it away from Wyll.

Astarion held Wyll's sword high, his grip amateurish. He dodged one strike, then another, but he couldn't manage to land one in return now that the carrion crawler had him pinned. Wyll watched in silent horror, breathing desperately against his partially seized lungs, as the carrion crawler's jaw closed around Astarion's sword arm, jagged fangs piercing up and through the meat of it.

The sword tumbled from Astarion's grip as the carrion crawler shook him, like a weasel breaking a hare's neck. Its remaining tentacles lashed around Astarion's arm even as Astarion drew a knife from his belt as tried to slice his way free. Wyll held out hope for a moment that Astarion, as undead, might be immune to the paralytic venom. But his flailing knife-hand grew sluggish, then slack. He was staring at Wyll, eyes burning like red-hot iron, fragile with panic.

Everyone else had already died for Wyll. He couldn't let it happen again. He couldn't let Astarion be taken.

But he couldn't do anything to stop it as the monster gathered Astarion up against its body, binding him tight with its legs as it turned to stare at Wyll with its great black beadlike eyes. Wobbling-Orange-Diamond stepped out in front of him, lowering her head and stamping her hooves in a defensive display that made Wyll want to cry. He wasn't the one that needed protecting!

One meal secured, the other two much trouble to fight for, the carrion crawler turned into the darkness, climbing up the sheer rock wall and vanishing over the lip of the cliff-face. And just like that, Astarion was gone.

Gale’s spell must have broken in the night.

Paralysis wore off slowly, leaving Wyll plenty of time to imagine several nightmare scenarios through to their bitter end. Carrion crawlers didn’t eat their prey right away, preferring the foul taste of decay. But would undead flesh already suit their appetite? He imagined Astarion being eaten alive, undying, until the fire of his resurrection poured back the flesh onto his bones. An unending feast. Or perhaps it would try to kill and leave him to rot, leave him slit open and choking in one of its buried caches.

If you could die from shame, he’d have been dead.

Wyll was the one who’d dragged Astarion into the Underdark, who’d neglected to warn of carrion crawlers, who Astarion had thrown himself into the fray to save. Astarion had put himself in harm's way twice now to save Wyll’s life–the arrows and now this–and how had he repaid him? With mistrust and fear? With attraction even Wyll knew was wrong?

When Astarion had thrown himself in front of Wyll, beating back the carrion crawler with his own rapier, he had been magnificent. In all his years on the path, no one had ever stepped between him and death except Mizora, and there was always a price to pay for her generosity. He would have rather–he would have paid that price to keep Astarion safe.

Wobbling-Orange-Diamond kept watch over Wyll and the bodies, patrolling around them and occasionally pawing at the ground. Her lights waved signs of apology and concern.

He got back control of the large muscle groups first, breathing coming easier, then swallowing. He’d drooled horribly during the deepest stage of paralysis. When he found the strength to sit up, he was reminded of the head injury from hitting the rocks and found himself vomiting bits of cooked ripplebark mushroom and bile. Blazes, it hurt. He had to sit there in agonizing immobility, his mouth tasting like death had crawled inside and a lance had been stabbed through his eye. It felt like hours before he could get the muscle control to open his pack and locate another healing potion.

They only had five left. Astarion had been wearing the healing amulet when he was taken, and the first potion didn’t much touch the headache, but Wyll decided it was better to save as many as they could. He could hear, at least, the stamping of Wobbling-Orange-Diamond’s hooves sharp like needles into his skull.

He explained to her as best he could through the lights that Wyll was going to fetch Astarion back. He asked her to stay with the bodies, and left the pack with Lae’zel’s head with the others.

Then he geared up–gathering the arrows Astarion had used, his bow and blade. There were a few enchanted arrows left in the case, mostly fire arrows and one each lightning and acid. Wyll also went through their supply of spell scrolls. Gale had been hoarding those, intent on rebuilding his spellbook, but needs must.

He drank an elixir of vigilance and let the world sharpen around him, the soft edges of interrupted sleep growing jagged and sharp. His headache was worse, but he’d just have to

live with it. Wyll thanked Wobbling-Orange-Diamond and started climbing the rock face the carrion crawler had used to retreat.

Tracking a beast was a familiar task, and doing so alone with a victim dragged off into the wilderness with a ticking clock before the monster got hungry and started eating them no less familiar. It was easy to slip on the Blade, like a well worn-pair of boots that knew exactly where to walk. He just had to not think about *who* he needed to rescue.

Some monsters knew to evade pursuit, to keep to sheer rocks and lose their scent in rivers. Thankfully, the carrion crawler was an animal and not thinking of clever tricks.

There were torn bits of mosses, churned soil and crushed mushroom caps leading him from platform to platform of the upper reaches. Scattered between them were blobs of yellow hemolymph that must have dripped from the beast's severed tentacles, and drops of red-black blood from Astarion's arm. Tracking it was easy. The trouble was finding the beast without it becoming aware of him first. The spells Wyll had available weren't well suited to this fight, he was going to need to set up an ambush.

He slowed down and started listening. The Underdark wasn't silent–there was always the creaking of rock, the distant wingbeats of stirges, the whistling of wind through canyons and the trickle of water. But with his senses heightened, he could just make out the insect chitter of the carrion crawler before he came upon its nest. Rather than meet it head on, Wyll started climbing.

From a perch on a high rock, he could see the beast's nest, a place where many generations of lichens and mushrooms had broken down rock into thick black soil before the carrion crawler had moved in. Years of tracks wove in circles through the mounded dirt. The beast wasn't carrying its prey anymore, all its legs free as it fussed and groomed its mangled tentacles. There was no sign of Astarion. That meant–

Wyll couldn't think about that yet.

There were still mushrooms growing outside the radius where the carrion crawler had disturbed. Better yet, some of them were torchstalks.

The carrion crawler paid no mind to the faint orange glow of the torchstalks, but when a blue light started bobbing in the air in the mushroom patch beside them, its head perked up. Wyll held concentration on the dancing lights, spell scroll at the ready and his bow strung beside him.

When the carrion crawler succumbed to its curiosity and wandered out towards the lights, Wyll activated the grease scroll and dropped a pool of flammable oil on the whole patch from on high. Then he swung up his bow, notched a fire arrow and sent it flying.

The carrion crawler screamed as the torchstalks went up in a chain reaction.

"Not so fun being burned alive, is it?" Wyll hissed. He looped the bow over his shoulder and swung himself over the side of the outcrop, climbing down a few handholds before dropping.

He'd learned his lesson on broken ankles.

The carrion crawler was still alive, but its shell was blackened and torn through by shrapnel, the legs on its left-hand side mangled. It wasn't so much a fight as a mercy kill when Wyll finally drove his rapier through the back of its head. The smell of scorched carrion crawler would have made him hurl if he hadn't already lost what was in his stomach.

But then it was dead. And there was still no sign of Astarion.

Carrion crawlers buried their prey, to hide their scent from other scavengers. They'd paralyze their victims, then kill them, then bury the bodies to let them putrefy before returning to feast. Somewhere out in that wide field of mounded dirt, Astarion had to be buried.

Wyll could have dug through every dirt pile by hand, but Astarion was *buried alive*. Every second wasted was another second Astarion was alive, and buried, *buried alive*, because of Wyll. He couldn't waste time digging up the rotting corpses of whatever other creatures the carrion crawler had stockpiled. And the creature's tracks overlapped too much to guess which piles had been made most recently. He needed a better way.

He was going to have to use the tadpoles.

Wyll suppressed a shudder. Every time he connected to Astarion, it seemed to get easier for their tadpoles to connect. Harder to block out that connection. Easier for Astarion to hurt him, if he wanted to. His terror of Astarion's threat rose up again, like a rising river bid to drown him. But Wyll was always terrified following the path that duty bid him. This was nothing new.

He let his leash on the parasite go slack and felt for the crushing terror that came from outside of him. It was just a trickle, like the first runnels of icemelt coming off a high mountain. Wyll followed the stream, and the channel widened as he grew closer. The carrion crawler had so many caches. Some of them were taller than him, deep enough to crush someone to immobility even if they were alive.

Wyll stepped close to one and the terror grew closer, dirt in the back of his mouth and lungs crushed beneath the weight of overlying dirt. Wyll touched the surface of the mound and the river became a flood.

Cazador could have compelled him to stillness, but he didn't. He hadn't needed to. Astarion's neck split, his wrists opened over the mouth of the sarcophagus, the knife slipped from his unwilling hands. All his strength lay puddled beneath him, soaking into the stone, and he was helpless to put it back. When the lid was moved into place above him, he could no more move it than he could change Cazador's mind.

At first it had seemed too close to kindness to be believed. To be left alone after such direct disobedience, instead of being flayed or run through with iron pokers or forced to dip his arms into boiling oil? Such a small thing, when Cazador had punished minor slights with overwhelming violence. But then the tomb was opened again, and Cazador lowered the second body into the tomb beside him.

His darling boy, who hadn't run fast or far enough.

When the lid was closed again Astarion wailed. He dug his fangs into his lover's neck, but there was no more blood to drain. Nothing was his. That was what Cazador was telling him. Anything he touched, Cazador would destroy.

And then the torture began. Pressed against his lover's body as it bloated and crawled with maggots, as it spilled into putrid liquid. Till there was nothing beautiful left of him, just another thing to torment Astarion in the dark, a source of maggots that infested his skin and fetid slime that puddled beneath. He was abandoned. He would live forever in the dark, forgotten and rotting and starving. He was choking, choking on grave dirt and decay.

He would live forever wishing he could die. And it wouldn't stop, it wouldn't stop, it wouldn't stop, it wouldn't–

Wyll slammed his fist against his forehead, the bright shock of pain severing the connection. He'd fallen to his knees at some point in the mired tangle of Astarion's memories, and found himself compulsively patting himself down to make sure his skin wasn't rotting and soaked in corpse juices.

Gods. He needed to get Astarion free.

Wyll shuffled backwards and angled a shaking hand up towards the top of the dirt mound, an eldritch blast sending dirt skyward in a rain of grit. He didn't want to hurt Astarion, but digging him out with only Wyll's hands would take forever. He couldn't bear that. He leveled another blast, and then another. Dirt and rock spattered rained down on him like stinging hail.

When the mound got below the height of his waist, Wyll abandoned eldritch blasts in favor of clawing through the dirt, raking it away from the center. He could feel Astarion still, trying to wrap around his parasite and drag him down with it. It wasn't malicious. It was just what drowning people did–try to grab anything to pull themselves to safety. But Wyll couldn't physically free Astarion if he was caught in a nightmare.

One of Wyll's hands hit something solid, and he threw himself into the effort, shoveling back dirt, sweeping it clear until he could see that he'd uncovered one of Astarion's hands. From that he traced where Astarion's chest and head must be and clawed at the dirt even more feverishly to get them uncovered.

Earth was heavy. If Astarion had been alive and buried this deep, the weight of it would have crushed his chest, stopped him from breathing even if there was a way to get air.

When Wyll cleared the dirt away from Astarion's face there was an awful moment of stillness, where Astarion didn't respond, where he looked truly dead: caked with dirt, eyes closed, face bruised, ear crushed against the side of his head and leaking blood where the skin had split.

Then, like the touch of Wyll's hands was a necromancer's shepherding pull, he began to struggle against the weight still holding his body down. "Master. Master, please," he begged

wretchedly, hacking and dribbling out muddied saliva. “Please let me serve you. I’m yours. Use me. Please. Don’t deny yourself any longer.”

“Astarion, it’s me. Wyll. Your master cannot touch you here,” Wyll promised. He swept away the dirt that trapped the mangled mess of Astarion’s shoulder and started to free his arms.

Astarion just whined in terror, shaking his head against the dirt. He hadn’t tried to open his eyes. “Master, *please.*”

Wyll tried to take Astarion’s hand, but the man jerked it away. “You’re free. You’re already free, Astarion.”

But Astarion was sunk deep in his own mind, and Wyll knew from experience that soothing words often weren’t enough to shake the snare of horror. Wyll pulled Astarion out of the dirt and into his arms, pressing that mangled ear against Wyll’s neck in hopes the sound of his pulse would cut through. The moment he was lifted, Astarion stopped struggling: went limp and docile against Wyll’s chest. But he wouldn’t stop begging.

Wyll used a knife to slit the skin of his wrist and offered it to Astarion—surely the taste would knock him back to the present if nothing else would. Astarion had said he’d never tasted human blood within Szarr’s keeping. But Astarion clamped his jaw tight and tried to lean away from Wyll, chest heaving.

“You need to drink, Astarion,” Wyll said. “You’re hurt, and this will help. Please drink.”

Astarion wouldn’t drink, and he wouldn’t stop shaking and making awful moaning noises of pain and terror. He stopped begging, if only because he refused to open his mouth now that the scent of Wyll’s blood was in the air.

Eventually Astarion must snap out of it. He’d realize he was leagues from Baldur’s Gate and Szarr’s crypt. Astarion couldn’t die from this. He was bruised and battered and had probably bled himself dry from the holes through his shoulder and the blood pooled beneath his skin, but Astarion couldn’t die from this. Wyll could wait it out and let Astarion pull himself together.

But Wyll *could* help him. And to be able to offer succor in the face of suffering and do nothing was—it was wrong.

And so, pretending the only one trembling was Astarion, Wyll reached out with the tadpole once more.

Astarion’s mind was like a steep cliffside covered in scree, a waterfall plunging into the depths, an endless chasm deep into the dark. He’d fallen in last time, but this time he’d at least known to brace himself. He didn’t let himself fall inwards; he held open the door and waited to see if Astarion could be drawn to him.

Once, in early summer, he’d found himself south of Waterdeep by the coast. Mizora had dropped him there after a plane shift from Avernus, and despite a few days of walking he hadn’t found any trouble needing the Blade’s services. Peace, what a novel concept.

It had been a good week–he'd had enough coin for supplies and food, and Mizora had been too distracted to mind him closely. A few days he'd worked for an orchard-owner picking sweet cherries and come away sticky and sweaty and aching from glutting himself on them. In the early evening he'd laid down in the grass and soaked in the sunlight, letting it warm him through after a brief frigid dip in the sea. He'd let himself forget about the future for a minute, pretend that there was only the screech of distant gulls and the grasses tickling his skin as they danced in the breeze.

He held onto that moment open like an invitation and tried not to flinch back from someone else clawing their way inside him. He was offering. He wasn't allowed to be frightened.

Astarion was like a wraith as he laid himself out beside Wyll. Features indistinct, protruding bones all *too* distinct. A stunningly naked specter. Wyll looked away even as he thought how all that pale skin would have gleamed beautifully in the sun.

"This isn't real," Astarion said.

"No," Wyll agreed. "But wherever you were before wasn't real either. And this is better, isn't it?"

Astarion leaned his head back, basking in the sunlight. "It's warm," he said. "And bright. And what's that bloody noise in the distance?"

"Gulls. I tried to remember myself back to the coast," Wyll explained. "I thought you might–it's about as far from the Underdark as you can get. Do you remember what happened? With the carrion crawler?"

Astarion thought about it for a long minute. Then, like he was recounting something from a dream: "That thing–it buried me. I was–Wyll. Wyll, you have to come get me. It's buried me and I think it's going to eat me and I don't want to be eaten. It's one of my very least favorite things, being eaten." He frowned. "Oh, but you can't get me, because you're dead. It got you with those face tentacles and you died."

"I'm not dead, and I already did rescue you. The carrion crawler is gone. You're not buried anymore. I'm holding onto you right now. Can you feel that? And can you please imagine some clothes on?"

"You don't think you're lying," Astarion announced, like that was an interesting novelty, or perhaps a joke. "You think all that's true."

"It *is* true. You're safe. You could be well-fed, too, if you'd only open your mouth and drink. I don't know why you won't drink."

"Thou shalt not drink the blood of thinking creatures," Astarion said. "The mast–Cazador forbids it. Compulsions to make puppets of spawn, keep them in their place. Can't drink blood from people."

"You did, though. You drank from me yesterday," Wyll said. "I gave you my wrist, do you remember that?" He glanced over and was relieved to see that Astarion had at least imagined

himself pants, if nothing else. Astarion saw him looking and glared.

“Of–of course I remember! I’m not an imbecile, I can remember things from one moment to the next,” Astarion hissed. Paused. Licked his lips, expression softening. “But I could have more?”

“I did promise I wouldn’t let you starve.” He knew Astarion didn’t trust his promises, but he’d keep saying them till Astarion could see the proof of them and believe him.

“And you rescued me?” Astarion asked, like this was a point of great confusion.

“Yes, Astarion. I killed the carrion crawler and I found you.”

“But why?” Astarion asked. “This was your perfect chance to get rid of me. You had the artifact, Gale’s spell was gone, you knew I couldn’t hurt anyone if I was being–if it was eating me. Why would you save me?” He threw his hands up over his face, hiding it from Wyll as his voice broke: “No one ever–why now? Why didn’t anyone ever–”

Wyll couldn’t bear it. He oughtn’t touch Astarion, he knew that. Astarion’s horrors were so much of touch: he’d felt that in Nessus. He’d known that from the casual way Astarion had offered his body up to them in negotiations for his freedom, like being raped would have been inconsequential for him, just another ledger entry of horror amidst the rest. So he shouldn’t offer Astarion his hand, or pull him into his arms or press a kiss (absolutely not!) between his brows and promise him that Wyll wouldn’t fail him again. In his body, half-felt with the intensity of their shared delusion, he was already holding Astarion, already imposing on Astarion’s space. But doing nothing was unbearable.

Wyll rolled himself up, kneeling next to Astarion. “We’re allies. We protect each other,” Wyll promised. “You saved my life earlier; I am not such a coward that I would fail to save you in return. I will save you as long as I am able. And that I did not know to do so before–in all those years you suffered in *my city* while I lived in ignorance: I curse the gods for keeping your plight hidden from me. I would have tried. I wouldn’t have left you to suffer if I’d known you were there.”

Astarion sobbed, rolling away from Wyll. Across his back there was a jagged wound, weeping circles upon circles between his shoulder blades, a thousand smaller cuts set between them.

The pattern shifted, as indistinct as Astarion’s features, and Wyll remembered that vampires had no reflection. Everything clear in Astarion’s self-image was what he could see of himself, everything else was imagination and sensation. But the wound upon his back–no matter how imprecise, it was something Astarion carried with him, inescapable. A mark of ownership? Or something more sinister? Wyll had never seen it, because the hellfire burn across his back would have covered the whole of it.

His curiosity didn’t matter. He was supposed to be comforting Astarion, not ogling him. Wyll pressed his hands against the ground, imagined the way the grass would have bent and crushed beneath them, the sandy-grit of the ground beneath. “You’re safe now,” he promised. “I’ll keep you safe.”

“I’m a monster,” Astarion sobbed, “killing me is what you’re *for*. Don’t you know that, you stupid man?”

“I became the Blade to help people. Not because I enjoyed hurting others to do so. If I could save everyone, I would. If every monster could turn out to be a wounded person that I could save, I would try to save them. I don’t want to hurt you, Astarion. I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

Astarion shook, curling his legs up against his chest and hiding his face against them. “That’s not how the world works,” he said at last. “You know that. I know you know that. You’re still afraid of me.”

Wyll swallowed. Of course Astarion knew that. Of course he did. “Being frightened doesn’t give me a right to hurt you.”

“And you believe that,” Astarion said. He laughed incredulously. “I dreamed about heroes like you, once upon a time, back when I was still naïve. I know better now. I knew better. I’d say you were a hallucination and I’m back in the tomb again, but I don’t think I could have imagined all of that. Everything…the sky was too blue.”

“Well, technically, this is a bit like a hallucination. We’re in my head.”

Astarion finally uncurled, leaning his head back again to face the sun. He sighed blissfully against the imaginary warmth. “And it’s wonderful. I could stay here forever,” Astarion said.

Wyll flinched. Astarion caught him, eyes catching his as Wyll’s fingers curled helplessly against the dirt.

Oh, Puppy, I could get comfortable here, Mizora had crooned, her nails digging into the back of his scalp as he tried not to think, knowing she could hear all of it and was drinking it down in voyeuristic glee. “You suffer so sweetly. Someday I’ll have you forever, what a treat to look forward to.”

“You’re afraid of me,” Astarion said.

Wyll exhaled. There was no point in lying in his own head. “I’m trying not to be.”

“Well I don’t know what to do with that,” Astarion said. “But I didn’t mean–I *meant* that you remember sunlight. And you let me in to feel it, what, just to be nice? And you rescued me from that giant insect. You’re probably insane, but–I wouldn’t want you to stop being insane, if this is what insanity is. I don’t want to hurt you either, not if it means losing this.”

Wyll’s heart thrilled, and he beat it back with a stick. Forced himself not to grin. “I’m honored.”

“Ugh, you’re *awful*.” Astarion made a face. “I don’t want to wake up. It’s going to be awful. I never want to wake up.”

“We can’t stay in here forever, some other scavenger is going to come looking for the carrion crawler’s corpse eventually,” Wyll told him. “And besides, I’m leaking blood and it’s all

going to go to waste if you don't drink it."

"I might…panic, a little," Astarion said. "It'll be embarrassing. My body isn't good at being good."

"There's no one here to see but me, and you've already held me up while I pissed in a helmet," Wyll pointed out. "I have very little room to judge."

"That is true," Astarion said. "Doesn't make this any less wretched, but–alright. Don't stake me. Thank you."

Wyll's tadpole lurched as Astarion slipped away and the fantasy dissolved out from under him. And then Astarion was in his arms again and grabbing for Wyll's wrist, biting it and whining when there were no fangs to pierce the skin.

"You're good, you're good, just drink," Wyll said, rocking them gently as Astarion continued to try and gnaw through his arm in between whistling sobs. He'd be bruised to hell if he didn't use a healing potion later, but that was alright, the pain was almost enough to distract him from the fact that he'd foolishly pulled Astarion into his lap before offering himself up for consumption. He was such an idiot. An idiot and a cad, he knew Astarion didn't know how erotic the noises he made while feeding were.

Eventually Astarion stopped trying to bite him and switched to licking Wyll's arm and suckling on the cut skin.

Far less embarrassing than What Wyll might have done if he'd woken up from being buried alive. Astarion hadn't even vomited. He remembered how much Astarion had hated the dark and used Komira's locket to summon their dancing lights again. Astarion made a keening noise and clung tighter to Wyll's arm. The lights looked overbright after the long trek through the darkness. Or maybe that was the blood-loss. Wyll's hands were starting to feel very cold. "You're doing so good," Wyll said. "You can have a little more, then we'll need to get a healing potion in you."

Astarion shuddered. "Gods," he moaned, dropping Wyll's wrist. Then he twisted around in Wyll's arms and kissed him full on the lips.

Chapter End Notes

and everyone say thank you Ushauz for both beta reading this chapter and convincing me I shouldn't leave their first kiss for the last chapter of the fic 🤣

Also shout out to Jellyfishline's fic Ever Watchful for inspiring the sequence on Wyll's thieving ways as a child & also for being a great Wyll backstory fic that you should read https://archiveofourown.org/works/58919293/chapters/150186235.

see you next chapter!

Chapter 13: Astarion

Chapter Notes

> I finally went back and edited the summary for this fic, which hasn't really been terribly accurate since they ran off to the creche together. Things continue apace! This is approximately 1/3 of the original content I intended to put in chapter 13, but it was growing alarmingly long and needed to be split up. I have no control over the amount of bantering these two do.

His body was nothing. It was Cazador's vessel, tool, puppet. It imprisoned him even after he slipped the noose of his compulsions, because there was no escaping himself. It gave him nothing but pain–in every flavor, in every hue, in every shade.

That had always been true. But now…

Fresh blood–human blood, like sunlight in his veins but twice as bright and singing – lit him from within. His mouth was full of the taste of it, the weight of it. Pain seemed a distant tether that held him to the surface of the world, while he floated somewhere up above it in ecstatic bliss. He knew the heartbeat was outside him, not actually swelling in his chest, but he didn't care. There were warm arms around him, and a body pressed against his and lips pressed against his. Sunlight. *His* sunlight–warm and steady and safe, finally *safe*.

Wyll pulled away and Astarion couldn't stop the sharp, wounded noise that left his throat. He tried to chase those lips back to euphoria, but Wyll turned his face and his lips met stubble.

"Astarion, we shouldn't," Wyll said. So disapproving that it pierced the soap bubble of bliss like the illusion it had always been.

Cold dread wrapped its claws around his ankles and yanked him back down into his body; bruised and bleeding and crusted with dirt from when he'd been buried alive only minutes earlier.

"Why shouldn't we?" Astarion begged. Just another minute of pretending his body wasn't an instrument of pain. Just another minute of pretending. "We survived. A kiss, to celebrate that we survived. You deserve it! Something to pay you back."

"I don't want you to pay me back," Wyll said, stupidly. His stupid gentle hands held Astarion's shoulders and stopped him from swooping forward and stealing that kiss without permission. His stupid mouth was frowning.

Oh, right, he wasn't interested in corpses. Astarion had thought–he hadn't felt any disgust when they were linked in Wyll's mind, but that didn't mean Wyll wanted a cold dead tongue

in his mouth.

“Right.” Astarion was practically grinding on the man, how mortifying. Ugh, he’d warned Wyll that his body wasn’t good, but that didn’t mean Wyll wouldn’t hold this slip against him. He tried to laugh, but it sounded painfully fake. “Ha! Of course you wouldn’t. You already said; no necrophilia, I just–I got carried away. You’ll forgive me, won’t you darling?”

“Astarion, no, it’s not that,” Wyll said, his brow wrinkling between his eyebrows in a way Astarion’s fluff-headed skull wanted to classify as ‘adorable’. “You’re not dead, and turning you down has never been about disgust. It’s–I don’t want *anyone* to be intimate with me to ‘pay me back’. Intimacy should be an expression of love, a statement of commitment, not a type of currency.”

Astarion blinked. The others had said something like that, back when he’d offered to let him fuck them in exchange for letting him out of camp. It had been stupid then, and it was stupider now, now that his body was singing with potential, whispering that touch could be *pleasurable*, not just something to endure.

“Not even kisses? I could understand–I guess some hopeless romantics might get hung up on fucking. But surely you’re not that much of a prude?”

“I don’t want you to use your body to pay me back in any way,” Wyll said. “I won’t use you the way your sire did. And I’m afraid I am indeed one of those hopeless romantics. I don’t want intimacy without love–I know some seek out pleasure for its own sake, but I want commitment first. Sorry to disappoint.”

Astarion wanted to kick his feet and wail. It *wouldn’t* be like Cazador, because he’d never wanted it when Cazador made him hunt all those miserable lechers or to stay pliant under the advances of his ‘honorable’ guests. But there’s no way he could convince Wyll of that. And begging would just make him seem like the pathetic slut Cazador had tried to mold him into.

He didn’t even know why he wanted it. He’d felt safe in Wyll’s arms, he’d been floating on the combination of blood and praise that turned his body into liquid pleasure, and he’d wanted more of that.

He hadn’t been thinking at all, brain turned to mush by the pain of nearly dying and the impossible relief of being saved.

Wyll had killed him. He’d killed Astarion, and he’d stood by and let the others hurt him more. He’d looked down on Astarion as some sort of beast and–yes, that was all predicated on a misunderstanding. And Wyll had apologized more prettily than any of the others, and Astarion had never been apologized to before, so that was a novel treasure he intended to hoard forever. And Astarion had tasted his mind, since, and knew how deep that regret went. He’d tasted his mind and knew Wyll was a rare and impossible creature, who didn’t want to hurt Astarion. That he was safety.

But still! There was something abjectly pathetic in crawling towards the first man who rescued him, who praised him, who freely offered him blood and sunshine, when Astarion had been so determined to hate him mere days earlier. Perhaps Cazador had been right all

along and Astarion's body wanted pleasure more than his mind wanted respect. He'd just assumed Cazador was full of shit, because nothing he offered ever gave him pleasure–the best he'd gotten was the empty static of hands on his skin when his marks tried to be sweet with him. This was mortifying.

"That's certainly a fine excuse," Astarion said, "though I doubt I'd believe you if I hadn't been in your head. A young thing like you, holding yourself in abstemious chastity till a courting maiden offers you her dowry? Hardly plausible, when you drift on the wind like a high-flung seedpod."

"Or a young man," Wyll said, not meeting Astarion's eyes. "I'm not so old-fashioned as that."

"My point still stands! What, have you been waiting to catch the eye of some other lovesick wandering hero? Planning for a life as an eternal virgin?"

Wyll flinched, and Astarion caught the lightest brush of his mind, the sensation of long nails on his skin, of a hot tongue plundering his mouth, of breath ripe with sulfur. Of being pinned still with his mind while his mistress made use of him.

Astarion held himself motionless so that he didn't flinch. Right. In all the excitement (and, in his defense, there had been a great deal of excitement) he'd forgotten about Wyll's rapacious master and the ruin she'd made of his mind. Of the things they'd shared in the depths of the hells and decided to never talk about.

Wyll didn't let anything show on his face either. "That's the plan. Virgin forever till I find true love. Does it make my blood taste better? Vampires in the books all go mad for virgin blood," Wyll joked.

"Hard to say," Astarion lied back. "You *are* delicious, though. If you ever have sex, you'll have to let me taste you again and then we can find out."

Wyll relaxed, and Astarion could feel him leaking gratitude to have his disclosure overlooked. Astarion pretended not to notice that either, and shifted back so he wasn't pressed so tightly against Wyll. He licked his lips–they still tasted like dirt. "You said something about healing potions?"

The cow was still there when they made it back to their campsite, along with all the bodies. Thank fuck for that, or Wyll would have gone haring off on another fool rescue mission.

They'd had to stagger back like a three-legged drunkard, leaning on each other for support. Astarion's bruised ears were throbbing, and his stomach felt cold and empty. And his shoulder still felt wrong where the beast's fangs had impaled it, despite the healing potions. But he couldn't ask Wyll for more blood, Not when the man's skin was sweaty and cold and his pulse was racing.

Wyll had nearly collapsed when he first tried to stand, which was when he'd finally mentioned the blinding headache he'd had since Astarion accidentally blasted him into the

rocks. Astarion had forced him to take the last healing potion–Wyll was the one who knew the way and the one with magic to fight off any beasts. He needed Wyll alive.

Astarion had assumed Wyll was fucking with him by pretending the little lights Better Gale made were a form of communication, but the beast had stayed watching the bodies for hours. So maybe that wasn't an extended joke at Astarion's expense? You could never be sure. Wyll and Better Gale flashed more lights at each other while Astarion laid down on his mushroom bedroll. He didn't bother to take his boots off. If some other monster tried to eat him it'd have to enjoy the taste of boot leather. He kept the bow and arrows close to hand.

Eventually Wyll also laid down. Their bedrolls were almost close enough to touch, because they'd set them up while Gale's spell was active. Astarion hadn't poked at the fact that his fetters were gone and he was finally, theoretically free. It didn't change much; he had no way of navigating the Underdark and no interest in wandering off alone to be eaten. But still, it was an odd feeling.

Almost as odd a feeling as whatever was curling in his chest watching Wyll sleep. There was just the beginnings of stubble growing back from where Mizora had burned him bare, and Astarion could clearly see the split along the side of his head where the explosion had nearly knocked him dead.

At least all the healing magic Shadowheart had poured into him before he died had gotten him the beginnings of eyebrows and eyelashes. Humans without either looked very peculiar; like small scaleless dragonborn. Wyll didn't look peculiar. He had a nicely symmetrical face, a strong chin, and a lovely belly that peeked out through the enormous hole in his cropped-short rib armor. There was a long, deep carved scar that curved down past his ribs. They really had to find him better armor. The lack of hair just made the scars all the more prominent, made him look fragile. Mortals were so impossibly fragile.

One of them should probably be keeping watch, but Wyll had passed out before Astarion could suggest the idea. And Astarion didn't think he'd be able to stand up if he tried. So he lay there and tried not to trance; Better Gale was surprisingly vicious in a fight, but he'd still feel better not relying on it to sound the alert.

The trouble with not trancing was that the alternative option was *thinking*. And with Wyll right there, shifting restlessly in this sleep, it was impossible not to think about Wyll. And the fact that Astarion had kissed Wyll. And the fact that Astarion wanted Wyll to do it again.

Wyll hadn't asked him why Astarion had kissed him, which was the only scrap of relief to be had in the whole thing. Presumably he thought Astarion had thrown himself at Wyll like a grateful peasant rescued from a pack of gnolls, overcome by lust at the sight of his heroic biceps. Or out of some mercenary drive to repay Wyll for his rescue.

Astarion didn't think that was what happened. But he didn't know for sure. He couldn't explain it. He'd been overcome with terror when he'd fallen back into his body, and then he'd been drinking Wyll's blood and Wyll had started telling sweet lies to him, and bliss had just swallowed Astarion up like fog. And then he'd kissed Wyll.

Kissing his marks when he was swept up into their arms was a well-worn pattern, perhaps his body had simply reacted to the stimuli of being held close. Because there was nothing in his head at all sometimes, and his body knew what he was for.

And now *he* knew that it was possible to be pressed up against someone and feel pleasure. He kept pressing against that sensation like the nub of his fangs crowning through sore gums. Pleasure. He wanted to unhinge his jaw and swallow it whole, drown himself in sensation if that sensation made him warm and safe and syrupy again. After two centuries of shit, surely he deserved that?

What he didn't know was whether it had been different because it was Wyll. Or because he wasn't starving. Or because he'd just been rescued for the first time in his un-life and had been driven briefly insane.

It had to be because it was Wyll. People were terrible selfish beasts, one and all. They might mime and playact at virtue and selflessness, but they only did that because they wanted rewards they could only reap through the appearance of selflessness: a spot in a better afterlife, adoration of others, a favorable plea-deal when their other crimes were uncovered.

Wyll was different. Wyll was *suicidally* different–Astarion couldn't imagine the man was long for this world, given his compulsive need to fling himself into the jaws of death for complete strangers. But Astarion had poked at his mind, practically crawled around in there. If there was a motive to Wyll's heroics beyond a childish belief in doing what was 'right' and fury over injustice, it was well hidden. And given the wreck Mizora had made of Wyll's brain, it was hard to believe anything could be hidden in there.

Wyll didn't want to hurt him. Wyll wanted to *help* him. He wanted Astarion to be his friend, or at least his ally. The only thing Wyll seemed to try to hide from him was how badly Astarion scared him. Which was an odd feeling, because at some point Wyll had stopped scaring Astarion. Sometime in the past few hours, with his blood on Astarion's tongue, curled up in a daydream together.

Wyll was dangerous, yes. And if he succeeded in his fool mission to have the others resurrected, they would overrule him and Wyll might cave on all his promises and betray Astarion again. But even that…Astarion wasn't sure. It was impossible to fathom Wyll keeping his word, but his mind shied away at the thought of him breaking it.

Until then, though. Until then, he could trust Wyll. As long as he didn't kill anyone while Wyll was watching. He was safe with Wyll, or at least safe *from* Wyll. (If Wyll got himself killed there'd be no one to protect him, so Astarion was going to have to stop the man sacrificing himself before they could get above-ground. Which meant turning the man down when Wyll dutifully offered him blood whilst about to collapse. Agony.) Being safe from someone was making his body go stupid. He wanted Wyll to kiss him again. He wanted to see if it felt as good as the first time.

Astarion ought to hate Wyll. It seemed vaguely pathetic not to. It wasn't that he'd forgiven Wyll for killing him, or for the rest of it. Astarion planned on holding a grudge on that forever. But then Wyll saved him from being buried alive, when there was literally nothing forcing him to do so. It would have made Wyll's life simpler in every way to leave Astarion

to be eaten by that wretched insect, and he hadn't done it. How could he hate the only person who'd ever saved him?

…the second person who'd ever saved him. Karlach was the one who'd forced the others to release him, who'd made them feed him, who'd made them *listen* to him. She'd let him have a taste of her blood, just a taste but enough to make him half in love with her. Wyll was honest, when he said he didn't want Astarion to pay him back for being rescued. Maybe Karlach had been too? She was dead now, and he'd never know, but maybe she'd been telling the truth. Maybe she could have been safety.

Dead was dead, though, no matter how deeply Wyll was sunk into denial. Astarion wouldn't waste time thinking about what might have been. How her lips might have felt on his skin, how big her hands were and how much of his waist they could encircle. How soft the skin of her tail probably was–tiefling tails were very sensitive. He doubted any of the devils in Avernus had played with her tail the way she deserved. Karlach probably didn't have some archaic obsession with true love, either. She'd have indulged him, if he'd asked.

She was dead though, if he wanted someone…it had to be Wyll.

He wasn't so fool as to think this brief respite was going to last. They were going to turn into mindflayers, or be eaten by Underdark monsters, or caught by cultists or githyanki or hunters for Cazador. Either his master's deal would hold and he'd live through a thousand deaths, or it would burn him up to ash. Wyll would die. Astarion would end up in the Hells or back at his master's side. Astarion didn't have the choice to spend years hunting for a lover that wasn't disgusted by the undead and coax them into kissing him. He could have Wyll, or he could die wondering if he could experience pleasure like that a second time.

And Wyll wouldn't kiss him, because he wasn't in love with Astarion.

So. The only way to get what he wanted was to seduce him. How hard could it be? He'd seduced people a thousand times. He'd smelled arousal when he'd bitten Wyll earlier that day, the man must have a masochist streak a mile wide. Perhaps that was why he was so selfless. He was getting off on being a good person. That would explain everything.

Astarion should probably feel bad about planning to seduce Wyll. The man's reluctance was probably less about the romance and more about the rapist holding his leash, and there Astarion was, fantasizing about using that body for his own ends. A good person would feel bad about that.

When he tried to think about something else, though, the sensation of being crushed by an endless weight of dirt, of lying in the tomb while his flesh rotted and a foolish boy decomposed beside him, took him by the throat.

Things he wanted always went wrong. People he wanted died. He shouldn't think about Wyll like that, not if he wanted him to live–

But they weren't going to live. They were definitely going to die, whether or not Astarion managed to seduce Wyll. So there were no risks. No risks except the possibility that if he pushed Wyll on this, the man would change his mind about protecting Astarion. About not

beheading him and leaving him at the bottom of a river. It probably wasn't worth it. But what if? What if Wyll really was just like Astarion, and he'd also never experienced pleasure with touch, and Astarion could give that to him? What if Astarion gave him pleasure, and it made Wyll so loyal to him that, even if the others were resurrected, he would lay claim to Astarion and protect him? What if, what if, what if…

His mind chased itself in circles as he lay there in the darkness, his body still tight with anxiety that had him jumping every time Wyll shifted in his sleep or there were wingbeats in a far cavern.

He hoped those were bats in the distance and not stirges. Wyll had been feverishly warning him about all the Underdark creatures he should be panicking about, trying to make up for failing to mention *giant corpse-eating centipedes that would bury you alive*. Stirges were hardly the worst of the lot, but Astarion hated them on principle – bat-like monsters that acted like overgrown mosquitos and would swarm travelers to drain their blood. *His* blood. Wyll had promised him that blood.

Wyll had said the lingering scent of carrion crawler ought to keep most other monsters at bay. Astarion could hardly scare off a flock of giant bats with a bow and arrow, so hopefully that was true. The possibility of slipping into reverie and waking up with Wyll a bloodless husk did not make him feel even slightly more relaxed.

An unendurable lifetime later, when Wyll finally awoke, he made Astarion take his turn trancing. Astarion didn't bother to protest. Even though he knew reverie was never kind to him when his body felt like the crackling aftermath of a lightning strike.

He woke himself three times. Wyll woke him once, when Astarion's unconscious body started begging without his permission. Astarion laughed it off and curled up tighter beneath the blanket, pretending that a blanket did anything to hold heat against his undead skin. In reverie, the giant worm buried him again and again and he choked for air and knew that Wyll was dead and there was no rescue coming. He was called to his master's study and punished for being trapped away from the manor at sunrise, for being away from his side only a single day. He was placed in the tomb and left to rot.

When Astarion woke next, he declared himself fully rested. Wyll didn't argue, just rolled up his sleeve and asked if Astarion needed breakfast.

A mouthful of blood would have made everything better, but Astarion couldn't. "We've only the one healing potion left," he said. They'd both been too anxious to use the last of them, saving it for the possibility of something truly dire. "And I've told you already. I need you *alive* more than I need breakfast."

"We'll find you something today," Wyll promised. As if he could bend the world to his whim to make it so.

Wyll had eaten his meager rations of mushrooms and jerky while Astarion was trancing, so they were free to start back on their doomed march immediately. Astarion helped him load the bodies back on Better Gale. They'd lost rigor mortis and were beginning to bloat, armor

drawing tight around their abdomens. Astarion swallowed bile and tried not to think of what would happen next.

Since the cow and Wyll needed dancing lights to talk, Wyll kept the ring. He did at least give Astarion the courtesy of keeping one light hovering over his shoulder. It was foolish, how his body wanted to panic at the slightest hint of full dark. He had darkvision. It wasn't as if he couldn't see. But he was trying very hard to not remember the tomb. To focus on things that were as un-tomblike as possible.

Eventually he couldn't stand the silence any longer. "So, now that you don't have the excuse of being too out of breath to entertain me, you decide you'd rather talk to the cow. I hate being neglected, you know."

Wyll raised his eyebrows. "If you'd like me to teach you the light-signs you could join the conversation–or I could narrate for you! Wobbling Orange Diamond was just telling me about local geography. She thinks there's a wizard's tower a ways ahead, if we veer a bit south of our original route. They might be able to trade us for healing potions."

"Scintillating," Astarion said flatly. He crossed his arms and waited for Wyll to finish talking with his betters, which apparently included the cow. Wyll started narrating to him, using voices like he was acting in a children's puppet theater performance. Because he didn't want Astarion to feel left out of talking to Better Gale. Astarion couldn't decide whether this was more or less humiliating, so he continued sulking until Wyll finally gave him his full attention.

"So what is it that you'd like to discuss, my poor neglected travel companion?" Wyll asked.

Astarion had plenty of time to think of potential questions by then. Think of and then discard. There were smart questions he could ask; ones that he'd use if he were trying to seduce someone. But strategy had never been his strong suit. "You said that you became a monster hunter to help people," he said. "But your pact binds you to hunt for *her*. Which is it?"

"I am limited in what I can say of my pact," Wyll hedged. "But both are true. You know my pact binds me to hunt the targets my patron selects, so long as they meet the negotiated criteria. But the work I do as the Blade is my own."

Astarion had been practicing with the bow earlier, keeping it strung at the bottom notch and working on the speed that he could get the bow braced. Wyll had said it was best not to keep it braced all the time, because it would stretch the string and they didn't have replacements. And that a skilled archer could make a half-strung bow ready to shoot in seconds. Astarion was still working on it. The loose string gave him something the fidget with. "Could your mistress order you to kill me?" Astarion asked.

Wyll looked at him sidelong. The answer was obviously *yes*. Heartless, Mizora had said. Whatever other caveats Wyll might have negotiated–no humans, no civilians, no fluffy little bunnies–Astarion was the same as Karlach in this. "I wouldn't," Wyll said. "You have nothing to fear from me."

“Except the possibility that, if she were to order you thusly and you refused, she might yank you down to the Hells,” Astarion said, twisting the string around his fingers.

Wyll set his jaw. “Can we talk about something else?”

“I cannot fathom why you would have chosen to be a warlock, of all things. You said that it was ‘worth the price’–when that price is presumably servitude your entire life and then eternal torment afterwards. So either you’re a fool or she’s bound your tongue to lie about the pact. Or it was a real devil’s bargain. Something you couldn’t refuse…”

“Can we talk about something else?” Wyll repeated. “Something I’m not pact-bound to silence on, perhaps.”

Wyll sounded serious, but he didn’t seem angry. Yet. And this was important. Astarion needed to know if he was actually safe with Wyll or if there might be, for instance, an angry Cambion who’d forbidden him from kissing that would be coming to claw Astarion back to Cazador if he put his lips on her property again. “I did mean what I asked yesterday–is only your tongue bound? Could certain things be expressed in gestures? Charades? Abstract art? Detect thoughts?”

“I cannot speak on the pact, or the ways in which I cannot speak of the pact,” Wyll said. “But know this: Mizora is a lawyer for the Archdevil Zariel. She is not a novice at writing contracts.”

That was probably code for ‘no’ on communicating about the pact in other ways. But Astarion had felt Mizora’s abuses through Wyll’s tadpole, felt her hands on Wyll. If that wasn’t bound behind some arcane barrier…there was a chance Astarion could learn more via the tadpole. That, or the liberties Mizora took with Wyll weren’t part of his pact. They didn’t have to be. She just had to get him into a position where he couldn’t refuse.

“Can you speak of things your contract does not cover?” Astarion asked. “If I asked, for instance, if your contract forbid you from reading. And it didn’t do that. Could you tell me ‘no, that’s not in my pact’? Or does that count as providing information on the contract?”

“That would count as providing information on the pact. Since, if we played that game long enough, you could infer what was in the pact by excluding everything else. Would your sire have let you speak of his commandments, even to say what they were not?”

“One of his commands was to never acknowledge that he was more than a mortal elf to anyone outside his household, so no.” Astarion frowned. “This is very irritating. Your mistress might have left me more convenient loopholes to exploit. It would be good to know if she might, for instance, interrupt us once again to punish you for breaking a rule I don’t know about. Or to give you a task that keeps us from accomplishing our goals. Or to cut my head off and carry it back to Cazador for kissing you. Just hypothetical examples.”

“Let me deal with Mizora,” Wyll said, an entirely unsatisfactory answer.

Astarion tangled his fingers in the bowstring and resisted the urge to pull, digging the strings into his flesh. Wyll *wanted* to keep him safe, sure. That wouldn’t mean shit if Mizora was

going to show up to drop them both in a pit of infernal maggots again.

They walked a ways further, ascending a rocky hillock that had Astarion stowing the bow so he could use both hands to steady him. Better Gale was certainly a better climber than Gale had been, despite being a bovine. Perhaps they could bring it up to the surface with them. Having a pack animal to carry all their burdensome supplies sounded quite nice.

At the top of the hill, Wyll stopped to catch his breath. There was a narrow fissure in the rock walls around them, through which they could see a view of the Underdark beyond, glimmering like a luminescent candy shop shining in the dark. It would have been beautiful if Astarion didn't know every gleaming light out in that darkness was some sort of mushroom, or insect, or crystalline rock that wanted to lure you into slipping off a cliff.

Astarion fidgeted with the single dancing light that Wyll had left him, soft to the touch like the yolk of an egg and utterly without warmth. He could see through the edges of his fingers when he laid it close enough. People with magic didn't appreciate how awful life was when you didn't have any magic of your own. If he were a wizard he'd surround himself with wonderful things and never complain again.

At last, Wyll took mercy on him. "She knows I must rid myself of this parasite if she is to keep me for herself," Wyll said. "She won't send me off to become a mindflayer. If she wanted me dead, she'd have already killed me. And I can tell you what she has already said in your presence–she was amused by the notion of me keeping you for *entertainment*. Of me hurting you. Which I would never do, you have my word. But I'm not forbidden from touching you."

Had Mizora said that? Astarion's memory of her arrival was a bit hazy between the hunger and the bliss from finally feeding and the being lit on fire. How very unfortunate. Seducing Wyll would be twice as hard if Mizora had implied he would be a mindless animal using Astarion for his pleasure. That whole 'leashed dog' shtick. But at least Wyll wasn't going to get in trouble if Astarion pursued him.

"Of course you wouldn't hurt me. Has she met you?" It felt peculiarly easy to say that, like it wasn't even a lie. Had he ever been this confident before that anyone in all of Baldur's Gate wouldn't willingly hurt him? Wyll was so helplessly, pitifully, attached to his self-image as a do-gooder. It was just impossible to imagine.

"In answer to your initial question, though," Wyll said, with the tone of a man desperate to steer the conversation back to safer waters (which Astarion had generally heard as a prelude to someone announcing they were married and would thus *not* care to join him for a quick shag in the alleyway behind the tavern), "I became the Blade for my own reasons, unrelated to the pact. It was some five years ago when the Blade made his first foray into heroism."

As they walked, Wyll described a pretty story that might have been printed as an adventure pamphlet for grubby children to share and fantasize over. A young hero forged–a boy orphaned, a heroic rescue, goblins slaughtered, an oath sworn to protect the defenseless, etcetera. The unlikely odds of Wyll being within earshot of a goblin raid and close enough to intercede before they stuck the wailing child dead would have made Astarion roll his eyes if

he'd read it in print. Perhaps they'd been torturing the boy for sport and Wyll was simply squeamish of recounting those details.

"And so you decided to devote your life to wandering the countryside and saving the downtrodden, in addition to the tasks set by your patron," Astarion concluded. "Did you ever consider resting? Settling down? I suppose that, if your pact does not guarantee you income, you must do something to earn your supper."

Astarion was fairly sure Wyll was upper class Baldurian nobility–he'd known the Szarr family crest on sight, and he spoke with the deliberate cadence of a man who'd been tutored in elocution and rhetoric. Wyll could be using that family money to rest on silk sheets and sip wine in the Upper City; instead he chose to scrabble in the muck fighting goblins one by one. Insanity.

"I had nowhere better to be than the countryside," Wyll said, "for people are rightfully wary of diabolists. Putting down roots was never an option. In truth, I think the Blade saved my life. I could not change my circumstances, but I could still save others: that was something I could cling to in my worst moments. It gave me purpose."

"I take it that your family did not approve of your pacting to a devil and turned you out," Astarion said. "Or did you get in trouble with the law?"

"A bit of both," Wyll said. "Though the circumstances relate to the swearing of my pact, and I can only say so much. Let us just say…I was raised by a single father. A loyal servant of the Flaming Fist. When he discovered my pact, my father was forced to see me exiled rather than risk my pact be used to corrupt his service of justice."

Wyll said it so reasonably that it took Astarion a moment to realize what a load of codswallop that was.

"Your father exiled you? From the city?" Astarion asked, to clarify that his hearing wasn't going. "Because he was worried you might corrupt his very important work of extracting protection money from tavern owners and hassling streetwalkers? Who gave him the power to do that, the Grand Duke of Baldur's Gate? If a Flaming Fist could exile a person just for disliking them I'd have been booted out of the city thrice a tenday."

Wyll choked, probably swallowing down his protests that the work of the Flaming Fist was virtuous and pure in service to the coffers of the city government, or whatever it was that good Upper City boys believed. "Well – yes. I grew up in Wyrm's Rock fortress," Wyll said, "the same as Duke Ravengard and his son. The duke's son and I were inseparable as children; we were the same age. When I made my pact, there were concerns that I had already corrupted Duke Ravengard's son into diabolism. My father had the Duke's ear, and the decision was made."

"You are shitting me." Astarion was vaguely aware that the current Grand Duke had a child (children?), though he couldn't remember a damned thing about them. Wyll's posh accent didn't match the child of a lowly Fist or Gauntlet. But if he'd been an officer's child, whose father was a companion of the Grand Duke himself…"Are you telling me that your father and the Grand Duke were having an affair? Is that what you're telling me?"

Wyll looked horrified. “That is not what I said! And my father is – my father and the grand duke are widowers! It wouldn’t be an affair.”

“Oh, so he has his ear in private, and no other body parts? I’m just saying that this seems like a direct and very personal connection for what ought to be a relationship between the Grand Marshal and one of his lieutenants. Unless–no. Wyll, tell me that *you* weren’t fucking the Duke’s son.” That would explain everything. Wyll as the forgettable young fling of the exalted Prince of the Gate, whose own father had conspired with the Duke to shuffle off into exile, so a more eligible suitor could be found. The diabolism was mere pretext, and Wyll had seemingly taken it for truth.

“Can you think of no other reason why two people might be confidants beyond having sex?” Wyll asked, seemingly amused.

“Well, they might,” Astarion said. “But I hardly think you and the Duke’s son were running a criminal enterprise together.”

“The Duke’s son snuck into the Counting House as a child because of me,” Wyll said. “There was hidden treasure there, I was convinced. Didn’t get far before being dragged off to face justice from my–our fathers.”

Wyll would, of course, never admit if he’d been having sex with the Duke’s son. Astarion would have to go spelunking with the tadpoles if he wanted to drag that secret out of him, and while Astarion did very much want to know the truth (desperately), digging for buried treasure in Wyll’s head wasn’t going to increase his odds of winning another kiss.

He had to stay focused. His competition for Wyll’s affections was practically royalty. But, on the bright side, that “competition” seemed to have let Wyll be exiled with nary a complaint. Hardly the work of true love. Presumably they’d moved on to better, more suitable suitors.

“And after all those fond memories of childhood thievery, he did not object to your fathers sending you away without a trial? I assume there wasn’t a trial, on account of how there’s no law against diabolism in Baldur’s Gate.”

Wyll shook his head, somber. “I left willingly. It was for the best that we be parted. My father was right–there would always be a risk that my pact and his oaths would come into conflict. By leaving, I could protect everyone.”

“Not exactly the words of a man who took a pact willingly, if I might say,” Astarion commented. “And this was five years ago? How old even were you? Twenty-five? Practically an infant.”

“Seven years past. I was seventeen.”

Astarion stopped walking. Wyll paused, looking over his shoulder with that a look of concern. Astarion was shit at human ages. He knew that. There were children, littler children, teenagers (best to avoid bringing back children and teenagers no matter how easy to lure, their families were often quite persistent in attempting to get them back), adults, and decrepit, wrinkly adults. He’d thought Wyll might be thirty, perhaps thirty-five. It was the scars. And

the easy way he had with people twice his age, like he didn't even consider the possibility of deferring to his elders. Though that might be because he was used to rubbing elbows (and other body parts?) with nobility. Still, the thought made something itch in his brain.

He opened his mouth to try to explain to Wyll that there seemed something wrong in a child leaving their home to protect their parents from their own malign influence, but he couldn't seem to get the words in the right order. What came out was a stumbling: "That's very young."

"I was old enough to tie my shoes and wield a blade," Wyll said, smiling. "I know that for you elves, seventeen is practically a babe, but humans often leave the house at that age to start their careers, if they haven't left already for an apprenticeship. You needn't worry that I was a forlorn, wandering child."

Wyll said that with a breezy smile on his face and the easy confidence of a man who'd never told a lie in his life. So why did Astarion feel a sudden hollow ache in his chest, like his world was ending, seven years ago and somewhere far away?

Damned tadpoles. Astarion shook the thoughts off and pretended he hadn't noticed Wyll's slip. He didn't need to: Wyll had left a much more obvious clue.

"You just said, not five minutes ago, that you might have died forlorn and wandering if you hadn't taken up the Blade. Child or not," Astarion said, thinking suddenly of slipping between the press of bodies in a crowded pub and listening to the conversation all around him, feeling as if he was so translucent that someone might step right through him. Being a shadow of a person, knowing that if Cazador finally tired of him that night and put him out of his misery, no person in all of Faerûn would notice the difference. "It's hard to be no one. To have no one. For a parent to sentence their child to that…"

"I left willingly."

"And what would have happened if you said no?" Astarion asked. "Would they have had you marched outside the city gates by force? Would they have struck your head from your shoulders? What is the point in saying you *went willingly* if you had no choice?"

"You don't understand!" Wyll snarled, turning on his heel. Fear flared in Astarion's chest for a moment–*ah, this was how far you could push Wyll before he resorted to violence*–but Wyll only walked away with his shoulders hunched, hurrying to catch up with Better Gale and the bodies.

Astarion was *right* though.

Sure, there were shit parents all over, and Wyll wasn't the first to be kicked from his home for making a choice some asshole didn't approve of. But forced from the city? Cast out in the wilderness in exile? That level of assholery was simply beyond the power of most parents, no matter how petty and selfish they might be.

Wyll was clearly in denial about the whole thing, the same way Petras always rationalized what Cazador did as some divine higher plan instead of a series of cruel impulses. Wyll

needed to believe that being kicked out of his home served some higher purpose, because otherwise he was no one *and* his father and lover and his father's maybe-lover were all pieces of shit.

Which they were. Astarion firmly placed the Grand Duke of Baldur's Gate, his son, and Wyll's nameless lackey father (and potential lover to the Grand Duke, perhaps that was simply one more thing Wyll was in denial about) in the category of "selfish bastards who deserved a knife in the eye". Most people belonged in that category, really, but he'd make sure to oblige those three personally if the opportunity came out.

He wasn't going to snap Wyll out of believing that bullshit, not so long as Wyll needed to believe it. It was like trying to claw a life preserver away from a drowning man, or Dalyria away from believing in a cure–not impossible, but difficult to avoid without getting scratched to hell. Astarion wasn't so dedicated to the truth that he wanted to get shredded for it.

So when he skipped up ahead to catch up with Wyll and their bovine pallbearer, it was with a change of subject on his tongue. "Seven years, you say. Should I take it you're seven years behind on gossip from the Gate then? You should have said, that is the one form of news I've ever bothered to follow."

Wyll was jammed shut like a spring-coil trap of affronted dignity, but Astarion had plenty of experience in soothing men's egos. Though he wasn't sure if it was his great skills as a diplomat that finally unlocked Wyll's jaw or Wyll's open longing for his home city. Astarion couldn't imagine why anyone would miss Baldur's Gate, but Wyll did.

The things Wyll remembered and the places Astarion went had little overlap–he'd never been to the market at the Wide, or any of the thousand little shops, or the Fist barracks. His memory of the harbor were mainly on his knees, while Wyll's were of looking out on the boats in childish wonder, dreaming of faraway places. But Astarion remembered *some* things. Folks in bars complained about change as consistently as taxes–shop ownership, fashions, menus, curfews. He was able to piece together a few retirements of shopkeepers Wyll remembered, a few dramatic fashion trends; morsels that Wyll seemed to feast upon as if they were a proper recounting by a historian.

They talked about a few narrow parks near the entrance to the Upper City that Wyll remembered, the never-ending complaints about the Parliament of Peers, the choking smog that had settled on the city one year in Wyll's adolescence and sparked debate over the use of coal stoves in the homes of the lower city. Anecdotes that two strangers, having nothing in common but their place of birth, might discuss in some faraway place.

Once coaxed into talking, Wyll's tongue spilled out with the parts of the city Astarion had long since forgotten. Shops in daytime, sweet rolls and roasted chestnuts, the cacophony of the Wide. Climbing up onto rooftops and hiding away to watch the setting sun. Swinging out in silks at an upper city soirée, one of the tame ones where the only drama was scandalous seating arrangements and public duels over infidelity and broken alliances in the Parliament of Peers.

Wyll seemed quite besotted by the idea of dueling someone. Which was a stupid of him, the man swung a sword at people all the time already. Astarion assumed he'd read some novel as

a child that made the whole thing sound noble and dramatic, instead of a way for untrained idiots to hop around and give each other gut wounds with all the elegance of gnomes on stilts.

Their conversation was interrupted by Wyll spotting movement up ahead in the darkness. A juvenile giant lizard, maybe half Astarion's height, stalking some fire beetles amidst the lichen hanging from the low cave roof.

Wyll signaled Better Gale to douse its lights and plunged them all into darkness except for the dim glow of the fire beetles. Then he mimed for Astarion to shoot the lizard with his bow. He had to repeat the motion a few times, because Astarion at first assumed he was just pointing at the lizard as part of his attempts to impress Astarion with the wonders of Underdark ecology.

Underdark ecology was *not* wonderful. It was awful.

But giant lizard, even miniature ones, had quite a lot of blood in them. Even if the blood was cold and thus unpleasantly reminiscent of long-dead flesh, Astarion wasn't going to turn his nose up at plentiful blood. He drank till his shriveled stomach felt ready to pop, then laid back in the soft lichen to watch Wyll drain the rest of the blood into their emptied healing potion bottles before butchering the meat. There was a certain amusing irony in putting blood in a healing potion bottle.

They had to take an extended break for Wyll to cook his lunch, strips of meat spitted on skewers made of chitinous black mushrooms he'd made them stop to collect hours ago. While he did that, Better Gale foraged for lichens and Astarion lazed about, enjoying the sensation of being full. His shoulder and ears were still annoying him; he was certain at this point that the parasites in their brains had interrupted his regeneration right along with his sensitivity to sunlight and Cazador's compulsions. His damned fangs still hadn't grown back and it had been *days*. He'd rather be toothless and aching than back with Cazador, but the slow healing made him anxious. They only had the one healing potion left. If something else attacked them, they would be utterly screwed.

Or maybe it was lying on his back that was making him anxious. Too much like the pose he'd been forced into under the carrion crawler's improvised grave, too much like the tomb. He turned onto his side, but then his poor ear was pressed against the ground. There was no good way to lounge and the silence was gnawing at him again.

He sat back up and tried to lure Wyll back onto the subject of his childhood.

It was all very educational. Astarion was learning that Wyll had a very nice voice. That he had complete trust in the Flaming Fist as an institution, clearly inherited from his father. That he'd been a romantic his whole life, and a devoted reader of the sorts of books that made teenagers misty eyed over the thought of waiting till marriage before putting out for sex. (Astarion was still strategizing, but he thought this was a promising development. If Wyll's interest in chastity was a newfound reaction to Mizora, it would have been difficult to feel altruistic in luring him away from virtue.)

He also learned that Wyll loved dancing an improbable amount. All his references to galas and soirées were in the context of the dance floor, and he was quite disappointed Astarion

hadn't kept up with the fashion in dances–whether there was a shift back towards choreographed line dances, or if waltzes occupied more of the dancer's time. Whether the sarabande was still the first dance of the night.

Astarion contemplated whether he ought to use that as his angle. But he'd always loathed dancing, when Cazador had brought his spawn to galas to flaunt in front of his allies. He hated being pawed at. And worse, his head could never keep the steps to any dance in line, so he'd end up fumbling over his own feet and lurching in the wrong direction whenever he wasn't being manhandled by whichever overbearing patriar was taking loan of him at the moment.

That was an amusing anecdote, if he remembered to not mention what came after the crowds thinned out and here was none left but Cazador's loyalists. But Wyll just frowned at Astarion's attempts to joke that dances had been much simpler back when he was first turned and that he was better off with the waltzes, where his partner could just put him where they wanted him.

"A slow dance is supposed to be about connection," Wyll protested. "It's a conversation between two dancers. Not orders from a master to a servant. I'm sorry that any would treat you that way."

"I was there to be decorative," Astarion said. "Perhaps they were gentler to people of their own status. I only danced with the people he chose. When Cazador brought us out, it was to offer his allies the opportunity to -" his jaw snapped shut. He hadn't meant to say any of that. Why did he keep opening his fool mouth in front of Wyll?

Not that Wyll didn't already know the shape of things. He'd certainly already guessed that Astarion was a whore, from the way he'd rejected his kiss. And he knew about the tomb, and the boy who'd lain beside him there. It wasn't like Astarion was keeping his dignity by keeping his mouth shut.

"Mizora would control me," Wyll said, "You know that. But you don't know what she would make me do, when she had her hooks in me."

He had a fair notion of the shape of it. "I assumed," Astarion lied, "that she was making you do evil things. Taunting children, robbing farm-wives, encouraging fools to take up a pact of their own. That sort of thing."

"There's little purpose in a devil forcing you to do evil. Actions taken under compulsion don't count on Hell's ledgers," Wyll said.

"I was thinking that it would make you miserable, and she would have enjoyed it," Astarion said. Did the ledgers matter if Wyll was already permanently bound to the hells?

"Right," Wyll said, with a miserable, strangled laugh. He poked at the fire. "Let's not give her ideas. I'd been going to say that she used it to make me dance with her. She knew that I love dancing, and that I missed it. She'd offer to use some infernal magic to make music for us and sweep me off my feet, but I didn't *have* to say yes, and I didn't. She didn't like that. So eventually–well. I didn't have to say yes for her to take what she wanted."

Wyll could talk about it. So it wasn't part of Wyll's pact. It was just something she did, because she could and Wyll couldn't stop her.

"What a sore loser," Astarion said, before he could stop the words. "I mean, really. Is it too much to ask for, to be controlled and tortured by someone with *dignity?* They see you care about anything, and they just have to snatch it away, because you existing as more than their plaything drives them mad."

Wyll stared at him, eyes wide and intent. Almost hungry. Astarion shivered, tried to shrug it off. "Or anyway, that's what Cazador was always like."

"No, you're right," Wyll whispered. "I just have never been able to talk to anyone about it. I cannot reveal her presence to any who do not know of the pact."

That, at least, was an agony Astarion had been spared. His siblings were variously wretched and insufferable, but at least he hadn't been kept tied in total silence. They'd been barred from speaking ill of Cazador directly, but his compulsions left considerably more leeway for metaphor than Wyll's pact.

"It is odd, isn't it? To finally be able to talk about it. I fear my tongue oft does not know how to stop, once it starts," Astarion said. "Well, I hope she has not managed to strip all joy from dancing. It'd be a shame to give her the satisfaction."

Cazador had hated for them to enjoy anything. To be *his* meant to have no other loves. He'd tolerated Astarion sewing, even ordered him to mend his siblings' clothes, then grew jealous at the thought Astarion might be enjoying the work and forced him to embroider his own skin. Astarion had stomped down and hidden for decades his interest in reading, till Petras blabbed to Cazador and he'd been forced to read a favorite pamphlet aloud while Cazador burned the words into his skin with a heated brass needle. Cazador had filled him up like a palimpsest, wiping the marks clean with a mouthful of blood whenever he ran out of space. After, Cazador had castigated him for his puerile taste and began to subject them to poetry readings for their 'intellectual improvement'.

Anything he thought you loved he'd claw away from you. There had been years when Astarion couldn't open a book without his mind trying to skitter off in a panic, when he couldn't stitch a straight line because his hands shook too badly. Where he couldn't speak, because Cazador thought he loved the sound of his own voice and commanded him to silence. You were supposed to wait, dull and empty, for him to make use of you. You were to have no gods but him.

Ironically, the only rebellion he had never punished was praying. But praying had only ever led Astarion to cracked-open despair. No other god would take him, no power would ever intercede. Presumably Astarion's futile scramblings had amused him.

Wyll was an infant. Not even a decade in the clutches of his master, who allowed him so much freedom: to walk beneath the open sky and eat and drink and hold a sword and pretend that he had purpose.

But she wouldn't allow those things forever, Astarion thought. Cazador had preferred to break his possessions swiftly, to savor the shocked agony as they were reduced from people to things in a single night. Mizora had, frankly, more subtlety than Cazador could dream of. Which was a low bar–Astarion had no pretensions that Cazador was subtle. He didn't need to be subtle or clever: he was rich and powerful, and that was enough.

Mizora was toying with Wyll. She would snuff out the candles of Wyll's freedom, one at a time, just to enjoy seeing him wriggle on the hook of her control. Astarion might not know much, but he knew a sadistic bastard when he saw one. Wyll's master was no less inescapable, his final fate no less assured.

There was no point in feeling pity for the damned. What Astarion felt had never made a lick of difference. Still, it set his teeth on edge. He'd always hated being forced to watch his siblings' punishments. It was too much like a mirror.

"I don't know," Wyll said, jarring Astarion out of the sewer drain of self-pity. It took him a moment to remember what they'd even been talking about, but he'd figured it out by the time Wyll continued: "She doesn't like me to spend time with–I haven't had the chance to try. To see if perhaps dancing would still be enjoyable with someone else. So I don't know."

Wyll was looking at him with such naked hope in his eyes, it was almost obscene. People didn't look at Astarion like that, not unless they were bald and impotent nobodies who'd been waiting for a gentle hand and a beautiful man to coax them through a long dreamed-of orgasm and Astarion had decided to get them killed for it. But Astarion had wanted Wyll to want him. He wanted Wyll to stop being so damn afraid of him, so that he might agree to forget about the future and kiss him again. This could only be good. Astarion had to use this chance.

"We could find out," he said with a casual wave of his hand. "You were telling me that I'm wrong about dance, that it's supposed to be something delicate and lovely. I'm curious enough to let you show me."

"I would be honored," Wyll said. He tried to keep the excitement out of his voice, but he was already scrambling to his feet like a boy promised a day on the docks watching the ships. Then he remembered that he was supposed to be cooking his lizard strips, and had to ask Astarion wait a moment longer for him to turn the skewers and place them further back from the fire where they wouldn't burn.

Astarion didn't mind the delay. He was remembering, belatedly, how much he hated dancing. A necessary sacrifice, to get Wyll to touch him.

Astarion stood awkwardly amidst the lichen, like the strings-cut marionette he was, when Wyll stepped up to his side. He waited for Wyll to position him. Instead, Wyll tapped his own shoulder and said, "Your left hand goes here." Then he waited for Astarion to place a hand on his shoulder before setting the other hand, firm but not hard, against Astarion's back. Their other hands joined and Astarion breathed, trying to force his body to remember how good it had been when Wyll kissed him.

Wyll stayed frozen for a long moment as well. Doing the same thing? Astarion wondered if, when Mizora forced Wyll to dance with her, he acted as lead or follow. “We don’t have any music,” Astarion said. “So you can’t blame me if I’m even worse than usual.”

“I’ve never tried to teach this before, so if it doesn’t work, we can chalk it up to my failings as a teacher. Promise me that you won’t panic and lobotomize me if you don’t like it?” Wyll asked, voice a bit shaky.

Right. Because that was the main difficulty in Astarion’s plan to get Wyll to kiss him again. He’d done too good a job scaring Wyll off from punishing him, back in the dark after the others had died.

“I told you already, Wyll. I don’t want to hurt you. Not if you’re not going to hurt me first.” Astarion hesitated. It was his one weapon–there was no way he could get to a bow before Wyll would blast him dead, or spit him on an infernal sword. “And I don’t actually know *how* to do that. I was bluffing. I got in your brain for a moment in camp, but I couldn’t figure out how to get *out* without you remembering you wanted me dead. Maybe I could hurt you, but I don’t know that I could do it without trapping myself in your head permanently.”

“Oh.” Wyll looked dumbfounded. With a shaky laugh, he said, “You are very good at bluffing.”

“The trick is to be delusional and convince yourself you’re not lying,” Astarion explained. “Could I do it? If I needed to, I’d convince myself I could.”

He waited for Wyll to step back and–what? Hit him? He’d terrorized the man, when Wyll had apparently had never planned on hurting Astarion, surely that merited at least a slap. If Astarion had done that to Leon, to any of his siblings, he’d have been on his knees squealing in pain afterwards. It was impossibly tempting to lean into Wyll’s tadpole and see what he was planning, to squirm away from him.

Astarion bit his tongue and waited, acutely aware of the absence of his fangs once again.

But Wyll just nodded. “That makes sense. One must be a very good liar to convince oneself to do the impossible.”

“You know, you’d be less unnerving if you were angry when you were supposed to be. Normal people get angry,” Astarion said. “Or did she steal your emotions along with your voice?”

Wyll flinched, and Astarion flinched back, them both stepping away from the proper position for the dance. His fucking tongue never learned, no matter how he tried to leash it. But Wyll still didn’t look angry, only wounded in a way that made something in Astarion’s throat clot up and make it had to breathe.

Wyll took a deep breath. Perfectly calm and controlled, the bastard. “When you rescue people, they are rarely at their best. Sometimes they’re terrified and hurting. Sometimes I fail. Sometimes I’m too late. Sometimes the monster you need to kill is someone’s wife or

someone's son. A hero wouldn't retaliate against people who struck out at them in fear and pain. I had to learn control."

"You save them, and then you let them hurt you for it? Wyll, I don't think that's heroism. I think you're some sort of masochist."

Wyll laughed. "To be a hero is far less glamorous than the books would have you think. But often people are quite contrite, later."

"If you're waiting for me to grovel, keep dreaming," Astarion said sharply. It wasn't that he wouldn't, or that he hadn't. But if Wyll wasn't going to hurt him, he would pretend he still had some pride.

"I'd rather see you dance," Wyll said. "If you haven't changed your mind?"

Astarion allowed him with a nod of his head. Their hands went back to places, like actors returning to the stage. Wyll encouraged him to use more pressure, to create tension between them that would allow him to feel even the most subtle of motion as Wyll moved. Then, utterly forgoing proper footwork, Wyll walked him around the fire, humming a tune under his breath.

Each time he changed direction, Astarion could feel it first in the hand on his shoulder, which was tingling like the aftershock of a bolt of lightning. He rarely reacted in time to let Wyll carry him smoothly, but he could feel it. "This is hardly dancing," he said as they stepped past the fire and pivoted. The smell of broiled lizard meat was terminally unromantic.

Wyll paused humming for a moment. "Not yet. But it's a conversation. If I signal you in a direction you'd rather not go, push back into my hand. I'll change course."

Astarion tried it. Wyll laughed when he resisted three turns in a row and nearly ran them into the cave wall, shuffling them in place rather than running headlong into the stone.

"Good," Wyll said. "Just like that. But on a dance floor, try not to steer us *into* the other couples."

Wyll's optimism that they might survive long enough to see civilization was grating. As was the joke that he'd ever deign to be seen with Astarion in public. But Astarion wasn't going to point out the obvious, not when he had Wyll so close to where he wanted him. "What if they're exceedingly unpleasant people?" he asked.

"Better let me walk into them backwards then," Wyll said. "That way you don't get caught in the pileup. Much more strategic."

"Ah, of course. I shall keep that in mind."

Wyll continued to try to walk them in sensible directions, and Astarion continued to thwart him at every turn. Well, every other turn. Just to keep the man on his toes. Wyll kept telling him he was doing "good", even as Astarion nearly ran them into a mushroom, their packs,

and the cow. Astarion didn't care about praise, of course. He wasn't a dog that could be bribed with the smallest hints of affection.

"Do you trust me?" Wyll asked.

"Of course not," Astarion said. "Why?"

"I was going to suggest you close your eyes, to test how well you can feel the connection," Wyll said. "But if that would make you uncomfortable, we don't have to."

Astarion shivered, remembering Wyll's arms around him, the pounding heartbeat pressed against his skin, bloodied lips under his. "Is that all?" he asked, closing his eyes and then almost immediately stumbling. "I thought you'd ask for something difficult."

Wyll stepped backwards, and his hand pressed against Astarion's back, and Astarion floated forwards in his wake. Wyll hummed, pleased, and Astarion could feel the vibration through their joined hands. The world was much smaller with his eyes closed, even as his ears strained for any noise to guide him. Wyll hadn't showered, and prestidigitation never got a person fully clean the same way water did. The scent of him, sweat and blood and the jasmine oil he wore filled Astarion with something lighter than air.

"Good," Wyll said. "You're very good at this, Astarion."

Astarion's ears felt hot, caught pinned beneath Wyll's gaze. "Walking?" He asked. "Damned by faint praise indeed. I've had several centuries to master walking."

"You know that's not what I meant," Wyll chided, but his voice was sweet like a mouthful of blood.

Astarion wanted very badly to step closer, to close the space between their bodies and press his face into the crook of Wyll's neck. Wyll was still wearing that blasted armor with the metal ribcage, and he'd probably stab himself if he tried and–Wyll needed a delicate touch. Astarion couldn't rush him, or he'd scare him off forever. But caught between Wyll's hands, like a flower plucked and trembling, it was difficult not to fantasize.

Mortifying, to discover that every degrading name Cazador had called him over the dirtied sheets of the guest chamber were right. But he'd known he was broken for centuries. Who could die that many times without eventually coming back twisted and hollow? And, after all that, knowing this reprieve could never last, didn't he deserve pleasure? To want Wyll's touch, to want to be held, to want to be kissed and treasured and–

That was too much to imagine, even for him.

But just a kiss wasn't too much. Buoyed by blood, held with just enough pressure to feel real but not so much that he couldn't escape. Wyll opening to him, letting the sunlight in again. Surely that wasn't too much to ask.

"You look like you're thinking very hard," Wyll said.

"I'm thinking about how to bring you down with me if I trip over your feet," Astarion lied.

“I won’t let you fall,” Wyll promised, because he’d read too many books, and he knew that’s what the swoon-worthy hero was supposed to say. Insufferable. If only he’d read more books where the lovers saw each other in a tavern and immediately started getting undressed. Well, no. Maybe not those books. But at least the ones that didn’t treat a single kiss as a reward, to be bestowed on the readers twelve insufferable chapters later.

Eventually Wyll stopped, and they stood there together pretending they had an excuse to keep touching each other. Or that’s what Astarion was doing. “So?” Astarion asked. “Did she manage to ruin it?”

“I don’t think so,” Wyll said. “But it’s hard to know for sure. We weren’t even doing the footwork.”

“You’ll have to try again, then,” Astarion said. “I remain at your service, darling.”

A shiver of a thought rolled across Wyll’s mind, Karlach’s face rotting and wounded. Her wrapping her hands around Wyll’s neck as his stomach turned in shame for wanting someone else -

Wyll’s hands fell away and he stepped back. “We shouldn’t,” he said.

Astarion opened his eyes. Wyll was flushed, chest heaving more than was entirely reasonable for an athletic man who’d walked in slow circles on flat ground. He wouldn’t meet Astarion’s eye.

Ah. So that was the trouble. It wasn’t that Wyll was waiting for true love. It was that he thought he’d already spied it, and she was dead and rotting.

That would make things more difficult. But Wyll *wanted* him, against his better judgement. There was still hope.

Chapter 14: Wyll

Chapter Notes

hello! yes, I know, I know. It's been forever. In my defense I have written a great number of one-shots since this last updated. I am so full of ideas for one-shots, they are so tempting. But I have plans and schemes for the next chapter and I'm very excited to share.

Many thanks to Ushauz for beta reading this 🖖

LAST TIME ON NO GOOD END: Wyll and Astarion, having vanquished the carrion crawler, had a unplanned and spontaneous kiss. Astarion was fascinated to discover that he...didn't hate it? He rather liked it. He immediately began plotting to arrange for that to happen again, only to discover that Wyll has a huge crush on Karlach and is holding out for love.

Also, not important to the main plot, but Astarion is now convinced that Wyll was childhood best friends with/dated Ulder Ravengard's son.

They are still hauling the dead bodies of all their friends.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So,” Astarion said, “Karlach?”

Wyll resisted the urge to groan or, worse yet, bury his face in his hands. Astarion was watching him ever so intently as he lay on his bedroll, a smile playing at the corner of his mouth, his chin resting on his crossed arms in a picture of indolence, a glint in his eye that *might* have just been the light reflected off the fire.

Wyll avoided looking behind him to where the bodies were laid out on the cool rock. It was hard to look at them now and not notice the things he was trying not to notice: the beginnings of decay.

They’d made good time and Wyll would have kept pushing. On and on till he dropped, till they found the wizard tower Wobbling had spoken of and begged for its keeper’s aid. Most wizards did not hold mastery over resurrection, but one with a tower of their own, a beacon in the Underdark–it was possible. And if not, they might still have access to magics that would preserve the bodies and keep them safe till Wyll could surface and again put plea to Jergal’s envoy.

But Wobbling was no pack animal to be driven with a crop and spurs, and when she tired they had no choice but to rest.

So there they were, laid out for another night's perilous rest before a fire, Astarion asking questions and Karlach dead and rotting. Still, he owed Astarion the truth of his denial.

"Karlach," Wyll agreed, and tried to keep his voice even. Then, to clarify: "There wasn't anything between us."

"But you wish there had been," Astarion said, eyes sharp and perceptive as ever.

"I had entertained hopes." Fantasies. Absurd scenarios where Karlach might both forgive him for nearly killing her on Mizora's behalf and that she might desire Mizora's warlock. That such a romance could be more than a blink of an eye between one horror and the next. Wyll hadn't dared put words to this, hadn't had anything more than a feeling, a longing. A sense that, if Karlach were to wrap her arms around him, some unstuck parts of his soul might be pressed back into place.

"Who wouldn't?" Astarion rolled over, freeing one arm so he could gesture extravagantly. "She's one hell of a woman. Even, uh, before the hells."

"She has so much courage," Wyll said, remembering the fierceness of Karlach's smile, the strength in her voice when she judged him, when she'd forced him back onto the right path with Astarion. The fragile hope when Wyll had first sheathed his sword and let her live. "I'd known her reputation, her deeds, down in Avernus. I'd expected someone with no space left for compassion, for justice. But she proved me wrong. What she did on her master's orders no longer chains her."

Her soul was gone from her body and could not be revivified. Wyll held his thoughts in place and refused to contemplate where Karlach's soul might have *gone*. Refused to contemplate how Zariel demanded her favorite weapon be returned and Mizora asked Wyll kill her to accomplish it. Karlach wasn't fated for the hells. She couldn't be.

"Yes, yes, she was very much on board with your heroic fantasies of saving every last bleeding soul in Faerûn. I was thinking more about how much *fun* she was." Astarion said. "The rest of you lot are as sour as a wine-rack gone to vinegar. Karlach is fun. Not an uptight bone in her body. More curse words than a vulgar dictionary. And those arms…"

A strangled noise escaped Wyll's throat. "We shouldn't–"

"Notice that she could crush a devil's head with one squeeze of her biceps? That she could pick a man up and carry him, one-handed? That she's hot as fuck? Honestly, I think it's a little insulting if you don't notice how hot she is. Us beautiful people work hard to achieve greatness," Astarion said with a flick of his fingers.

"What she looks like was not her choice," Wyll said. Her tattoos, her scars, the metal vents that surfaced from her shoulders, none of that was her choice. Had she always been strong, before her engine? Or had the flesh-weavers of Avernus melted her down and remade her? What part of Karlach's body could she call hers?

Was she like Wyll, a stranger in a shell molded by hated hands?

“Would you really deny yourself the pleasure of loving her as she is, just because some devil’s grubby fingers touched her first? She had plenty of time to shave off her hair and burn off her tattoos if she couldn’t bear to look at them. I mean, really–can you imagine telling Karlach that you weren’t allowed to think she was fucking hot because of Zariel? What a–it’s absurd. It’s not like you’re any less handsome with horns than you were before. You make the things Mizora gave you attractive, not the other way around.” Astarion panted, out of breath from the earnestness of his tirade.

Wyll felt his cheeks heat. Nobody had mentioned–Astarion had to be messing with him, nobody could look at him as he was and see anything attractive in it. He looked like a *devil*. But then, none of Astarion’s thoughts that had leaked across the tadpoles had been revulsion. And he’d seemed disappointed, when Wyll had turned him down after their dance. And when Wyll had turned down his demands for a kiss. Could it really have been something other than obligation?

Either way, he sent up an apology to Karlach and hoped her spirit wasn’t watching them. Then felt guilty for hoping that, because her being untethered and following her body really was the best case scenario, no matter how mortifying it was for him. “She is beautiful,” he allowed.

“And she thought you were fine as anything,” Astarion said gleefully.

“Wait, what?”

Astarion grinned. “What do you think we were talking about, that whole day you were half unconscious and us playing nursemaid together? Alright, we talked about lots of things. But the subject of you, and how down bad she was for you, and how attractive she found those horns were a bit of a recurring theme. We were still waiting and hoping that you’d come out without too many burn scars, but–she definitely had a thing for the horns.”

“But why?” Wyll asked. If anyone should know that a devil’s form spelled only evil, it was Karlach. How could she look at him and see anything but her tormentors? Anything but the man who’d nearly killed her and the devil who made him do it? Wyll had looked at his reflection, considered it from every angle–he couldn’t pass for a tiefling, not with those horns, not with this skin. A devil’s displeasure was branded into him and any tiefling would know it from first glance.

“How the hell should I know?” Astarion said, shrugging. “She didn’t write a thesis on it, she just said you were ‘the most beautiful man she’d ever clapped eyes on, horns and all’. And that she felt wretched that Mizora had forced her way between you two and she’d never have a chance.”

“But I–” Wyll had assumed Karlach would never forgive *him*. What was there to blame, on his part? He’d blundered into her life and nearly killed her. Mizora did what Mizora wanted to do–it would always have happened. She’d have found a reason. If he had bent his soul and killed Karlach she would have pushed him further, asked him further, till there was some line he could not cross. He could see that now.

Astarion sighed. “Young lovers. Always jumping to absurd conclusions. You’re lucky you have me around, apparently you two could have pined yourselves into a pinewood coffin. And life is so very short for you mortals. When you’ve brought her back, ask her for a kiss right away. If you both want it, why deny yourselves?”

There were a thousand reasons why Wyll could not take a lover, no matter how much they desired him. He would not subject someone to Mizora. He could not offer them a future. And he was, deeply and cowardly, afraid.

But he let Astarion think he’d won, because explaining those things would be like skinning himself. There had never been any way to speak of it before; his heart still pounded when his words strayed too close to Mizora’s shadow. He’d told Astarion the truth—that Mizora had no reason for Wyll to hurt him and that Wyll would not, regardless of what she ordered. But he still knew better than to tempt her. She might not be willing to kill him yet, but she would gleefully punish any defiance he offered.

Another day of walking led them to a wide flooded channel and, across it, the wizard’s tower. The tadpole kept Astarion from burning in the frigid water, but he didn’t know how to swim and held tight to Wyll’s hand as they walked barefoot across the slippery rocks, their bootlaces tied together and hung over their shoulders. They were shivering and soaked to the waist by the time they climbed out on the far side, huddling around a flame Astarion summoned till Wyll could prestidigitation them dry again. Wobbling laid down and waited, her thick fur having kept out the water as she paddled along ahead of them.

There was a sussur tree in the wizard’s garden, blue flowers glowing in the dark. It set Wyll’s teeth on edge. When he explained to Astarion, who’d never seen such a thing, how a Sussur tree ate ambient magic, the man refused to go within thirty paces of it.

“Magic is what’s keeping the tadpoles from eating our brains and turning us into mindflayers,” Astarion said, keeping close to the shoreline as they went to the great door of the tower. “And it’s what’s keeping *me* from running back to Cazador like a witless puppet. I’m not risking that.”

The tower was dark, none of the lights on the outer walls lit and nothing shining through the windows. The top of the tower had crumbled, stonework fallen through in places. It was quiet in the way of dead things, and Wyll’s fist on the door rang out all the louder for its stillness.

There was no answer. The door was locked.

Astarion immediately suggested picking the lock. Wyll suggested they scale the mushrooms growing along the far side of the tower to try the front door before breaking into a wizard’s tower. But if the wizard was not there, they would need to break in—things were becoming truly dire with the state of their friends. He’d needed Astarion’s help to unload them from Wobbling’s back, their bodies were so fragile and bloated. He felt just as fragile.

Wyll laid himself out like a penitent before the door and prayed once again for Jergal to send the emissary they had been promised. No one came.

He could not fail them. He could not give up on them.

He *would* not.

He asked Astarion to pick the lock.

In the tower they found no signs of life, only puzzles, danger, and treasures. The owner's name was Lenore Hurst, a wizard who had apparently left for Baldur's Gate some years hence based on the correspondence she'd left behind. She had powered her tower's generator with Sussur flowers, which Wyll had to fetch in while Astarion hid in the far corner of the room, so they could use the elevator.

They scoured the place for anything which could help, keeping their eyes on a swivel for danger. Or, Wyll tried to–it was hard not to just watch Astarion as the man deftly picked locks and swung himself over balconies and lit up with delight as he opened treasure chests and raked his hands through piles of valuables. Astarion delighted was a sight he would like to see again and again.

On one of Lenore's bookshelves they found a half-full scroll-case. Wizards made good money transcribing scrolls, but this set seemed to have been for personal use. It was a fairly obsessive set of scrolls of gentle repose, alongside a plea for someone named Yrre to continue to cast the spell on someone named Myrna, and that she would be back soon. Beneath the flowing calligraphy of her plea there was a note in a blunt, squared-off hand that said: *It was too late, Lenore. I'm sorry. I've buried her by the garden.* The letter, with its dual correspondents, was moldered and dusty, both writers long gone.

He would not thank the gods for their intervention, but he thanked Lenore. He hoped nothing horrible had happened to her, this woman who had answered his pleas and then disappeared.

They kept searching. On a balcony there was a chest of oddly normal things that made his skin crawl just like the Sussur tree had. When they plucked the items from the chest–a spoon, a cup, a handkerchief–they transformed themselves into magical things. An enchanted pair of boots, a scroll of magical protection and a sturdy leather bag which Wyll immediately shoved his entire head into and crowed with delight. "Heward's handy haversack! A real one!" Wyll explained, passing it to Astarion for him to admire. Wyll had owned a bag of holding before the nautiloid and he had sorely missed the supplies it had held. This was a much finer make, and the enchantment allowed one to store a great deal more within it. But more importantly, the bag was a portal to an extradimensional space deprived of air. The bodies would be safe there from vermin–Wyll wouldn't have to shoo off flies and constantly cast prestidigitation to rid them of maggot larvae.

Exhausted and very pleased with themselves, they went back down to show their finds to Wobbling. Wyll cast gentle repose on the bodies, then wrapped each of them in spare bed-linens they'd found in the tower. Lae'zel's head he laid on her chest and bundled them together. Then Astarion crawled into the bag and helped Wyll lay the bodies to rest within it.

It was like he was a puppet with his strings cut the moment the bodies were safe. Astarion coaxed him back into the tower, away from the Sussur tree. Wyll held the haversack to his

chest while Astarion laid out their bedrolls, side by side in the aisle of Lenore's mushroom greenhouse. It was the floor that had the fewest openings to the outside world, and the mushrooms glowed with a gentle light. When Astarion opened his arms, Wyll let himself be drawn into them, the bag set aside.

"Would it bother you if we sleep like this?" Astarion asked, not yet untangling himself from Wyll. "I like–when you're close and I can hear your heartbeat, I know I'm not with him."

With Cazador Szarr, he meant. With the man who'd once killed Astarion's lover and trapped Astarion in a tomb beside him, so that he could not escape the body's slow decay. Who'd had Astarion's heart cut out and sold him to a devil for temporary immortality, to stop him from fleeing Szarr into death. Astarion hadn't spoken of his sire in many words, but the things that had slipped past the tadpoles were more than enough.

It was strange to think how afraid he'd been of Astarion, only a few days before. It was amazing how much Astarion had opened up. That he was willing to share his fears with Wyll.

Wyll had no reason to reject Astarion in this request–so small, so simple, so little cost to fulfill. It was only…Astarion was a very attractive man. And he was not in love with Wyll, but might feel the need to pay back any attraction that Wyll let slip. So Wyll would need to be very careful to guard his mind and body if they were to be in close proximity.

Still. He was the Blade of Frontiers. He'd mastered greater challenges than sleeping beside a man. "Of course," Wyll told him. "Do you want a drink before we sleep?"

Astarion's ears twitched, genuinely startled. They'd found another lizard, a small one, before they'd forded the water to the tower. Astarion had drank it dry and grown as sleepy and sluggish as an overfull toddler after a feast-day in its wake. It had been, frankly, adorable. And perhaps Astarion was accustomed to only eating once a day, or even less. Wyll certainly preferred to dine more than just the once.

"If you're offering, obviously I would never say no," Astarion said, pretending Wyll would have forgotten the many times Wyll had offered and Astarion had said no out of concern for Wyll's health. It was reassuring to be deemed strong enough to offer donations again.

Wyll took off his armor, and then his overshirt, that way he wouldn't have to fuss with the sleeves. Astarion made a choking noise, and covered his face with his hands. "What have you done to that poor shirt? Wyll, the hem's gone to tatters!"

Wyll picked at his undershirt, the linen soft as butter even if it was a bit thin in spots and a bit shorter than it had been when he first got it. "If I hemmed it, it would be even shorter," Wyll explained.

"And perhaps the fact that you can't hem the thing without giving the world a good look at your nipples is a sign that it was ready to be retired into rags?" Astarion suggested, but his ears were pink as roses.

"Is the world going to see me in my undershirt?" Wyll asked. "I wasn't planning on putting on a fashion show, but if I do, I'll be sure to ask you for advice."

“See that you do,” Astarion sniffed, but when Wyll suggested that he could put his shirt back on overtop, Astarion batted the thing out of his hands. Astarion laughed, awkwardly. “Don’t be ridiculous, I’m not some blushing maiden. We’ll find you better clothes. Till then, let’s not get blood on these ones.”

Astarion drank from his arm again, laying on the bedroll with his head leaning against Wyll’s thigh. It was a safe position, in terms of accidental erections, but made it nigh impossible to resist the urge to pet Astarion’s hair while he was drinking. Wyll restrained himself by sitting on his other hand and hoping Astarion wouldn’t notice. The man wasn’t very observant when he was feeding. He didn’t say anything afterward when Wyll went to clean up and brush his teeth. And tend to certain other bodily functions. The tower had a toilet with running water, and he wasn’t chained to Astarion anymore–an opportunity not to be squandered.

Masturbating on the toilet was a mistake. The furtive high slid away almost immediately into shame and self-disgust that he couldn’t seem to wash off, not even with Lenore’s fancy lavender-scented soap. What if Astarion could smell it on him? What would he think of Wyll then?

What was Astarion to him? He was beautiful, of that there was no doubt. Only a few days of ready feedings had filled out some of that skeletal thinness, the gaunt hollows of his face. He had a roguish charm, an imperfect liveliness to him. When he smiled it always pulled a bit asymmetrically. Wyll liked that. A lot.

Mizora had always presented a perfectly polished image of beauty and Wyll had developed a bit of a revulsion to perfection, to not being able to see the wrinkles and scars and stray hairs. All of his preferences were shaped by her, even if it was in the inverse. What had he liked, back before he’d been pacted? He could hardly remember.

But Astarion was beautifully imperfect. And he was dangerous, and slotted awkwardly into the fantasies Wyll had trained himself so carefully to focus on to keep himself from temptation. But he wasn’t an option, Wyll reminded himself. Astarion had been Wyll’s captive, and Wyll his tormentor. There could be nothing freely offered between them, because they couldn’t go back and unstitch that past. Astarion had offered to kiss him because he felt indebted to Wyll, and there was nothing he wanted less than to have someone pay him with their body the way–no. And besides, Astarion openly disdained the romance Wyll was looking for. They were clearly not compatible, and Wyll’s heart had already fallen for the equally unattainable Karlach, and he needed to let this–this–*thing* go. He would let it go.

Astarion still had blood on his chin when Wyll lay down on the bedroll next to him. “You missed a spot,” Wyll said, and wetted a handkerchief for Astarion, wiping off the blood. It was only after that Wyll thought to ask permission for touching.

Astarion patted at Wyll’s hand. “I keep telling you, you’re not going to offend my delicate maiden-like sensibilities by touching my face with a handkerchief. Please stop apologizing for stupid things, it makes you sound like an idiot.”

“You don’t like it when I touch you,” Wyll said.

“Mm. I *didn’t* like it. I’ve warmed up to the idea. Now that I know you’re not planning to cut my head off. You’re warm, you’re soft, you’re very furry…if you weren’t liable to go haring off in pursuit of heroics it’d almost be as good as holding a cat. Not many cats with a penchant for self-sacrifice,” Astarion said. He plucked the handkerchief out of Wyll’s hand and tossed it aside. “Now lay down and sleep, why don’t you? We’re finally somewhere we don’t have to worry about being devoured by giant centipedes, and I don’t intend to waste it worrying.”

“I’m like a cat?” Wyll repeated, resisting the urge to laugh.

“Apparently just like one. Rudely refusing to sleep once it would be convenient for anyone else,” Astarion complained. “Stop snickering and get under the damned blanket.”

It was still strange, sleeping on his back. Wyll had always slept on his side before the transformation, curled up on himself like a pillbug. There was no way to protect your underbelly when you were sleeping on your back, no way to keep yourself safe from unwanted touch.

But Astarion took the invitation to sleep close to Wyll and crawled right on top of him like a second blanket, head on Wyll’s shoulder, legs tangled together. After several attempts to get comfortable laid flat like a corpse, Wyll’s arms found a place on Astarion’s waist. He remembered, abruptly, the burn scar and the marks it overlaid and tried to pull his hands away. Astarion grumbled and moved them back in place.

It was so much touch. Astarion was right, his undershirt didn’t cover enough skin. He could feel Astarion’s curls shift against his neck, the shape of his ear branded against Wyll. He could feel the texture of soft linen from Astarion’s shirt, imagined he could feel the skin beneath it. Astarion’s fingers on his bare arm, blistered and rough from scrambling over rocks in the Underdark and the absence of regeneration.

Wyll’s body rang out like a town crier at the slightest shift, announcing to him again that someone was touching him, and perhaps it was danger, and perhaps it was the end of the long dark times when he had been alone. He felt glutted on it, greedy for it, like the worst sort of churl for taking advantage of Astarion like this. Especially when Astarion seemed to sink instantly into his trance and was unaware of Wyll’s preoccupation.

But his body couldn’t resist sleep forever, no matter how it threatened to. When he awoke–strangely well-rested, with no memories of waking in the night–Astarion was lounging beside him, using Wyll’s chest as a pillow as he flipped through one of the books they’d taken from Lenore’s study. One of Wyll’s arms was somehow draped across his chest, in a possessive gesture that made Wyll cringe.

Astarion’s ears twitched, and his gaze flicked over to Wyll. “Oh good, you’re awake,” he said. He grinned, seemingly unoffended by Wyll’s encroaching arm. With one hand, Astarion patted the stack of books at his side, practically vibrating with the energy of a man who’d been awake half the night doing research. “I’ve been doing some light reading. I know you feel bad for this woman, because she seems very pathetic, but I think she might also be

insane? She built a construct that only answers to *poetry*. Poetry! She might be a monster. And she's apparently tamed a bulette."

"A bulette?" Wyll asked faintly.

"I know! Okay, thought: her demented poetry construct is up on the roof. What if you load up on sussur blossoms, shove them down its throat and kick it off the roof? Wouldn't that be fun? Or you could blast it. Apparently she's got some animated armor up there too, we could blast them and *then* kick the big construct's arse."

"Do the constructs leave the roof?" Wyll asked.

"They didn't come downstairs and murder us in the night for trespassing, so apparently not. It's lucky that we turned around after finding the magic bag, because if we'd gone up to the roof by mistake we might have gotten murdered. Maybe she figured that the locks and turrets would protect the ground floors, so she only needed guard dogs on the roof…"

"Well, if they're not going to harm us, we have no reason to harm them. Or destroy Lenore's property. She might come back someday and wonder where all her possessions have gone. It's best not to make an enemy of wizards."

Astarion sighed. "I knew you'd be no fun. Predictable as ever, Blade of Frontiers. She mentions having a ring that can cast light, which she's entrusted to her poetry-loving construct. Can we steal *that*? It would be useful, you could take the dancing lights locket to talk to the cow, and I could have the regular light ring. One for each of us."

Lenore's notes were unfortunately very unclear about which lines of poetry communicated what. They ended up fighting Bernard after all. It was good that Astarion had insisted Wyll bring a bag of sussur blossoms up as insurance, though it turned out Bernard was powered by the antimagic field they generated, just like the elevator generator, and was not actually deactivated by them like the animated armor.

The fight was unplanned, but still exhilarating. Astarion danced between arrows and lightning while Wyll used the rope hoist to swing himself around the room and throw Sussur blossoms at the animated armors till they stopped firing those bloody crossbows. Then he landed on the upper platform and fired eldritch blasts till Bernard toppled off the roof. They kicked the animated armor off the roof for good measure, Astarion giggling all the while.

"It's public safety, really," Astarion said, patting down his hair, which had fluffed up like an upset cat's after catching the edge of one of the lightning blasts. "The next adventurers to come through here might not think to read her poetry books at all and get blasted into smithereens. Trespassing is a sacred right of adventurers, I've read plenty of Drizzt books. I know how it goes. People shouldn't get blasted to smithereens for a bit of trespassing."

They'd figured out the boots from the chest gave a person featherfall, which Astarion insisted on using to jump off the roof of the tower and rummage through the scrap metal for the ring Lenore had mentioned. He whooped and cackled all the way down, feet kicking in the air. It reminded Wyll of how *fun* magic had been, the first time he'd gotten the chance to cast off a

scroll as a teenager. It took him a few minutes to school the smile off his face before using his pact magic to featherfall down himself.

Wyll checked in with Wobbling while Astarion went through Lenore's bookshelves again; when Wyll went back up, he found Astarion sitting at Lenore's desk using a githyanki cipher disc to interpret another text, scribbling notes on the back of a bit of parchment with a bedraggled quill. Wyll realized that, till that day, he'd never have thought of Astarion as a reader, had never seen him read. Astarion leaned quite close to the cipher, like he needed glasses to focus properly, but he was utterly transfixed by the work. Just like he'd been mending his shirt a lifetime ago, before the crèche.

Astarion had a way of acting that made him seem–well, it made him seem like a bit of a cad. A sleaze. Shallow. The sort of man who hung around brothels, not bookstores. And maybe that was what his master had wanted him to be. *You existing as more than their plaything drives them mad*, Astarion had said. Wyll didn't think Astarion had been hanging around brothels as a customer. It was strange, how much he knew and how little they'd said. There was sex involved in Astarion's abuse somehow, but the form of it he didn't know. Astarion knew too much of the gossip and the nightlife of Baldur's Gate to have been cooped up in his master's palace the whole time, waiting to be given away. He'd been out in the streets.

And what did vampires generally do in the streets, in any city, in any story? They hunted for mortals, lured them to their deaths. Astarion hadn't said as much out loud, but perhaps he still feared Wyll would blame him. But Astarion hadn't lured mortals for pleasure, or even for food. He'd done it for rats, for vermin, because his master ordered it.

Perhaps someday they would clear the air between them and put words to the things that they must have both assumed. Wyll could talk of what Mizora had done to him, the ways they'd overlapped in Nessus. That wasn't part of any pact. But it was hard, to follow Astarion's lead and complain about her, no matter how quiet she'd been lately. And it felt churlish to ask Astarion to explain if he could not.

"Are you just going to stand there and brood?" Astarion asked, setting aside the quill and staring with distaste at his ink-stained fingers. He had collected enough rings now to set one on each finger of his left hand. Not that he could actually attune to that many enchanted rings simultaneously, but he insisted on keeping them on regardless.

"I was hoping not to interrupt your work," Wyll said, walking over. "Learning anything interesting? I wouldn't have thought you knew Tir'su."

"You breathe very loudly, it'd be impossible not to notice you. And what's Tir'su?" Astarion asked, "I thought this cipher key would decode a puzzle of some sort, maybe a treasure map. Instead, it's gibberish."

Wyll explained that Tir was the Githyanki language, and that they encoded all their texts in Tir'su on circular slates. Lae'zel had talked to him about it–she was another person Wyll had been unfairly surprised to discover was a scholar and a dedicated reader. Why Lenore had a Githyanki slate or a cipher key to transliterate that slate into common glyphs, Wyll had no idea.

Astarion was thoroughly disappointed that the slate and all his hard work decoding it was useless, because neither of them knew the language. Wyll talked him into bringing it along anyway–the haversack had three separate compartments to store objects in, so they could fill up the side compartments with books without worrying about accidentally crushing their allies. And Lae'zel would surely be cheered to have something from home, at the beginning of her own exile. She had been banished even more thoroughly than Wyll, not just from her home city but from her entire species.

And however Lenore had come into possession of a githyanki slate, they could be sure the Gith hadn't given it away. It was like repatriating it to its rightful owners, Wyll reasoned.

Astarion's thieving fingers had fewer scruples than Wyll, and he abandoned decoding to scour the bookshelves for books worth shoving into 'his' pouch in the bag.

Down in Lenore's laboratory, they harvested the bulette's favorite mushroom treats according to the diary's instructions. Well, Wyll harvested the mushrooms. Astarion practiced flipping a knife and catching it in his hand. Wyll hoped they wouldn't run into the creature–it had clearly been years since Lenore had left. It was likely the bulette had moved on. But it was good to be prepared.

"I've had a genius idea," Astarion announced, setting the knife aside.

"For dealing with a bulette?"

"No? The plan for the bulette is to throw the mushrooms at it and run," Astarion said. "No. My idea is that you should practice kissing me. So that you're prepared to kiss Karlach."

Wyll raised an eyebrow. "Astarion, I've told you before, there are no debts between us–"

"Ugh, not that again. I know, I know, you're only interested in true love, you've no interest in undead whores, etcetera." Astarion waved his hand. "But! Consider this: Karlach isn't caught up in those same romantic fantasies as you. And, I mean, look at her. That woman was getting down with any good-looking tief lucky enough to have her till she got scooped up by the hells. She's going to know what she's doing. She's going to have *standards*. You don't want your first kiss with Karlach to be a disappointing amateur-hour production. That's why you need to practice with an expert."

Wyll blinked at him. "Astarion, I don't–sorry. I must have given you the misimpression I was judging you? I did not intend to. I know your master made you do many things, which we have not talked about, but which you know I know the shape of through our unintended–"

"I fucked people for him," Astarion said bluntly. "Mostly commoners I'd pick up for his dinner, who I seduced from taverns and docksides and brothels and street-corners. Sometimes he'd have me play the whore at home, for paying customers or his political allies or, if he was feeling in an especially humorous mood, his thralls. The whore of Baldur's Gate, at your service," Astarion said, sketching a bow. "You know, I genuinely forgot I hadn't told you all of that. So you can feel self-assured in the knowledge that I'm not the sort of man you would romance with your courtly fantasies."

“I’m sorry,” Wyll said.

Astarion snorted. “The sex was rather less unpleasant than the torture, you know. Between the two, I’d choose sex any day. Even the sex torture was generally less bad than the other torture so–well. If he needed you on your back he couldn’t be hanging you by your ears. Not that day, anyway.”

“I’m sorry about all of it, then. I’m sorry he hurt you, and that he forced you, and that he made you think yourself some lesser thing because of what was done to you,” Wyll said. He took a deep breath. “I don’t blame you for their deaths.”

Astarion looked at him, searching his gaze for something. “I know,” Astarion said at last. “I don’t know why, but I know you’d rather pity me than blame me. And I can’t begrudge you for it, because I do prefer to have my head atop my shoulders than rolling on the floor.”

“It’s not pity,” Wyll insisted.

“No?”

“She would–” Wyll choked on the words. Astarion deserved honestly, didn’t he? “I know what it’s like for your body to not be your own. I can’t pity you for that. And it wasn’t as bad–she never tortured me or lent me out or–it wasn’t as bad as what you went through. It was worst when she’d make me dance with her, because she didn’t even enjoy that. She enjoyed–” Wyll took a deep breath. He let it out. Compulsively, he closed his eyes, as if shuttering her vision might render Mizora deaf as well. “She enjoyed–”

“Don’t.” Astarion pressed his finger to Wyll’s lips. “I don’t need you to flay yourself on my account, Wyll. It hurts, doesn’t it? The first time someone breaks you down and makes you admit you’re nothing but a puppet, that they can make you do anything they want, that they can make you *enjoy* it. There’s not as much of you left to hurt the hundredth time. Don’t go digging that knife in on my account.”

Astarion pulled his hand away. Wyll built up the strength to open his eyes, and found Astarion looking at him the same as he had before. That same strange and searching look, like Wyll was a Tir’su cipher. Not pity.

If Wyll told Astarion that was the kindest thing anyone had ever said to him, the man would grimace in disgust. So he just said “Okay. No knives.”

“No knives,” Astarion agreed. “But you must admit, I’ve kissed every sort of bad kisser in the city. I know good kisses from bad ones. My argument is irrefutable. If you don’t want to disappoint Karlach, you simply must undergo my tutelage before you bring her back. That way you’re prepared.”

“Astarion, Karlach can’t kiss people.” This was a very important point that Wyll had forgotten the first time they discussed Karlach. “Because of her engine. She’s too hot.”

“Well yes, *normally* she’s too hot,” Astarion said, rolling his eyes. “But if you put her hands in ice water she can get cool enough to touch, temporarily. Ipso facto, if you have her dunk

her head in some ice water, she'd be cool enough to kiss. And she'd take a moment to warm up after being resurrected, prime opportunity for kissing. And then, you're obviously going to find a way to fix her engine. After which point it's going to be sex central, that woman is not going to hold back. I'm saying, you want to be prepared. And it'd be embarrassing to be getting kissing lessons while she's alive and awake and watching you."

That was absolutely not a thing Wyll needed to picture. He was going to not think about Karlach watching him kiss Astarion and not think about her enjoying it, and most certainly *not* think about her giving him feedback. He would strike the thought from his mind and damn Astarion for mentioning it.

"That's a very kind offer, Astarion," he said. "But I'll make do without. I'm sure that if Karlach was willing to be patient with my desire to court her, she'd be willing to be patient with this as well."

"Well. If you're sure," Astarion sniffed. "You won't see me offer again."

Astarion mentioned this kissing scheme of his twice before they left the tower. He seemed a bit overly preoccupied with the idea that Karlach wouldn't have a good time with Wyll–had Wyll been such a limp fish when Astarion had kissed him that he'd gotten the impression Wyll always acted like that? He'd been taken by surprise! And besides, it wasn't like he hadn't been kissed before. Several times in his childhood and teenage years–which had been fine, but forgettable–and then by Mizora. He didn't especially enjoy it.

There were three possibilities.

One was that Astarion genuinely was attracted to Wyll despite him being turned into a devil, and wanted to be intimate with him, and was suggesting this harebrained scheme because he thought Wyll was fixated on Karlach and could be seduced into liking him instead. The second half of that seemed plausible, but the first? As Astarion had reminded Wyll *several* times, their first meeting was paved with blood. It would take a very forgiving man to go past allies-of-circumstance to genuine attraction to a man who had killed him. And Astarion did not present himself as a very forgiving man.

So that couldn't be it. Another, more likely, option was that Astarion was still anxious about being so dependent on Wyll's goodwill. That he wanted control, and he thought intimacy with Wyll would give him that control. Putting Wyll into the worldview that he was familiar with. Wyll didn't like that thought very much, but he couldn't deny the logic of it.

Another option, which occurred to him while Astarion was cackling and shooting off firebolts to ignite the patch of torchstalk mushrooms in the gully beyond the tower, was that Astarion might be attracted to *Karlach*. Which: who wouldn't be? Astarion was clearly well-aware that Karlach was gorgeous. She'd gone out of her way to stick up for him from the start. Astarion and Karlach had been conspiring and joking like fellow soldiers after only a day left alone, with Wyll an awkward third wheel between them. And the fact that she couldn't touch him without making advance preparations might be an upside to Astarion.

If Astarion liked Karlach, but thought himself unable to compete with Wyll for her affections, that might explain his behavior. Maybe he wanted to make sure Wyll was good enough to deserve her. Or maybe he was sussing out the competition. Or maybe all that talk about practice was about wanting the experience for himself–to see if he could endure intimacy without old memories coming through, to see if the benefits were worth the cost.

They had to take Wobbling up the elevator and through the tower in order to get her out to the other side. They might not need her as a beast of burden right now, but Wyll wasn't going to abandon her. And she was good company. Level-headed. Though finding a rothé-navigable way through the next stretch of the Underdark required considerable exploration and backtracking–the tower was surrounded by ridges and gullies.

Along the way, Astarion found a Drow cache with enchanted leather armor. He stripped immediately, shimmying out of his trousers to try on the padded leather without even asking Wyll to turn around. (Wyll did anyway, of course.)

He was a bit jealous that Astarion had claimed the drow armor, because he was still stuck wearing that rib-cage monstrosity. Astarion had at least sewn in a leather patch to cover his midsection while awake and restless in the early morning. It didn't make it look any less stupid, but at least he was less likely to get his stomach sliced open. Still, the next decent armor he saw, he was upgrading. This one was enchanted against falls and definitely made him more nimble. Not worth it. He looked like a fool, and he already was an eyesore without the outfit to match.

But Astarion deserved some proper armor, and this suited him. It made him look a proper rogue. Astarion preened and insisted that Wyll let him get a look at himself via the tadpoles. Which they'd been rationing in hopes of not breaking down their mental walls any further, but…Astarion looked so happy to get to see his mental reflection in real time. It was worth it.

They did not succeed in avoiding the bulette. They *did* succeed in avoiding being eaten by the bulette, so Wyll was still counting it as a win. The thing went right for the bag of tongues of madness, shook the mushrooms out and then plucked each of them delicately off the ground to toss in the air and swallow whole. Like an enormous, murderous, armored sea lion.

Fascinating behavior. Wyll observed all that over his shoulder while they booked it in the other direction. He could only hope it didn't come back again looking for seconds.

Out of sight, Wyll collapsed against a mushroom and panted for breath while Astarion practically danced with excitement. There were advantages to not needing to breathe. Wobbling laid down next to Wyll and said, with a flicker of colors, that Fluffy Top was a very energetic elf. Wyll explained that Astarion had been trapped inside his whole life and had never seen a bulette before. Wobbling pondered this, then asked if that meant Astarion hadn't even had lichen groves to roll around in? Informed that Baldur's Gate had no lichen groves at all, and Astarion's master–like a Duergar cart-driver–had kept him too tightly chained to ever take time for pure pleasure, Wobbling regarded Wyll solemnly.

So that's why he's an idiot. Wobbling said.

Wyll nearly choked on his own spit.

“Are you gossiping about me with the cow again?” Astarion asked, narrowing his eyes at Wyll. He’d cast light on himself, which completely counteracted the stealth magic of the armor he wore, but did make him look like something out of a fresco to Selûne. His silver hair shone like a halo.

“No, no,” Wyll lied. “Just talking about our narrow escape. You were very quick with the decoy, thank you Astarion.”

Astarion preened. “You weren’t too bad yourself.”

Wyll had a sudden, inexplicable, thought of sweeping Astarion into his arms, thrilled to have survived, and kissing him absolutely silly.

Wyll shook his head. That would be inappropriate, obviously. He made sure to clear his thoughts of anything incriminating before accepting Astarion’s hand up and starting back down the path.

They found a gang of Duergar camped in the remnants of what had once been a fishing village, arguing about boots and joking about having enslaved a clan of gnomes. Complaining that they’d been sent back to hunt down one who’d escaped.

Wyll and Astarion had a short but pointed conversation through the tadpoles. Astarion didn’t want to get involved. Wyll wasn’t going to walk away from slavers and leave them to their business. Wobbling was in favor of kicking Duergar heads in.

Wyll pointed out that Duergar blood would make an excellent lunch.

“Okay, yes, that was worth it,” Astarion said, laying on the dock and licking blood off his fingers. They’d tried to fill up some of their empty potion bottles with blood after Astarion had drunk his fill, which had been an absolute mess. Blood everywhere. Wobbling had walked off to graze, not wanting any part of their foolishness.

“I’m glad you think so,” Wyll said. “But about this missing gnome–”

“Again, I know this hero stuff is obligatory for you. But we cannot pick up more quests. We already have to get back to the surface, avoid the githyanki, resurrect your allies, rescue the druid, and stop those tiefling refugees from being cast out and killed. And probably rout the goblin camp to make that happen. And figure out how to stop the worms from turning us into mindflayers. After you’ve done all that, you can come back and go gnome hunting.”

Wyll sighed. Astarion was probably right, but he didn’t like not knowing where she’d gone, this gnome who’d given the Duergar the slip. If she was hurt, or starving, or injured. Wyll had intended to take a prisoner to interrogate but–well. Wobbling had been very enthusiastic. Astarion had rapidly developed proper respect for their bovine companion.

“I know, I know,” Astarion said placatingly, patting Wyll’s arm with a blood-smeared hand. “It’s like a compulsion for you, isn’t it? You can’t walk away from some poor soul without it tugging on you, trying to reel you in.”

“I don’t want anyone to get hurt,” Wyll admitted.

“You must be disappointed very often, then,” Astarion said. “Given that there’s only one of you and a whole continent of suffering you can’t stop.”

“But I can stop *some* of it,” Wyll argued.

Astarion didn’t understand. Couldn’t understand. To him, other people were threats or bystanders to his suffering, and the whole world had spat in his face and refused to help him. He thought he was alone against the world. Until he found himself stable footing, he wouldn’t feel safe to reach out and help another.

Wyll was starting to fantasize about being that stable footing.

Which was absurd and naïve of him–Astarion had no reason to stay with Wyll past the point where they rid themselves of their parasites. Would likely not have the means to; Mizora would order Wyll on a hunt and planeshift him away from his allies and he’d never see them again. He had to stop letting his emotions get the better of him.

Regretfully, Wyll agreed they couldn’t spare the time for a rescue. He offered Astarion a handkerchief to wipe off his face–and ignored the fantasy of once again overreaching, of leaning in to wipe the blood and following it with an iron-flavored kiss. Astarion took the handkerchief and sopped up some of the blood, then started giggling over what a horribly inadequate tool it was for the task of his blood-drenched self. Wyll had to cast prestidigitation a few times to get them even halfway clean.

It was only afterward that Wyll noticed something odd about that fantasy–it had been from the wrong point of view. He’d been looking up at Wyll, kissing him. And, thinking it over, the same was true of the thought he’d had after the bulette. How very peculiar. What a mystery, the source of these daydreams.

Astarion asked once again if Wyll had reconsidered his genius kissing lessons scheme. Wyll said no, lowering his mind’s defenses for just a moment and catching a wave of disappointment, even as Astarion laughed it off.

Did he want this? Did he want Wyll, for some godforsaken reason? The mind boggled.

“I could be convinced to offer *you* lessons, though,” Wyll said. “You did well with that knife, but if you’d ever like to learn to wield a sword of your own…”

“I could be convinced,” Astarion said, just a shade too quickly. “You can never know too many ways of spilling blood. And a sword would have the advantage of keeping the people I’m trying to stab slightly further away from me.”

“Better yet for that purpose would be a polearm. But I suspect an oversized weapon would poorly suit your preferred combat tactics. You’re right that we need to make haste, but the advantages of preparedness if we find ourselves caught by an ambush instead of planning our own cannot be overstated.”

Wyll released the pact magic on his rapier so Astarion could use it, coaching him briefly in the bare basics, like the parts of the sword and the basic forms and grips. Astarion was already quick as anything, he just needed some foundations to build upon. And if Wyll watched carefully for flinch or fear when he had to adjust Astarion’s stance, his mind’s defenses half-lidded, who was to know?

It was a useful skill; he needed no untoward motives to teach Astarion. And the whole time, he never felt him flinch.

There was a Myconid colony…somewhere. Wyll definitely saw a Myconid, somewhere between the Duergar ambush and the spot where Astarion accidentally stumbled into a patch of timmask mushrooms. Things went a bit hazy after that bit, and Wyll woke up *somewhere* with Wobbling licking his scalp, her lights informing him that he was an idiot. His head hurt.

“Where’s Astarion?” Wyll asked.

Someone made an awful moaning noise. Wyll would know that voice anywhere. He rolled over and found Astarion lying on his stomach a few feet away, looking rather green in the face. And a bit singed around the edges. “Fuck mushrooms,” Astarion said, with conviction, as he propped himself up. “Why are there mushrooms that make you stupid? I hate that. And then, who planted mushrooms that blow up at the slightest provocation next to the stupid mushrooms? Vile. Awful. I hate mushrooms.”

Oh right, the torchstalk explosion. Just what Wyll needed, another concussion.

“Did you, um, die?” Wyll asked. Things had already been hazy from the tinmask spores, he didn’t remember the explosion except as a burst of heat and the sensation of freefall as he went over the edge of the platform. He wasn’t sure how close Astarion had been to the center of the explosion.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Astarion said. Which probably meant yes. He looked less injured than Wyll would have expected, which he would be if he’d regenerated after being killed. “I thought *you’d* died. I used the featherfall boots to follow you over the edge and I couldn’t find you at first. You bounced off that mushroom on the way down, I think, which is why you didn’t shatter your spine like a porcelain plate.” Astarion pointed at one of the giant mushrooms growing out of the cliffside above them. “So I guess fuck all mushrooms except that one.”

“At least we have plenty of healing potions now,” Wyll said. There’d been a few in the tower, and a few in the Duergar stash. Wyll reached into the side pouch of the haversack, and a healing potion presented itself to his hand. Truly the best feature of the haversacks was that you didn’t need to stick your head in them to find your stuff; whatever you wanted appeared

in your hand when you reached inside. Wyll passed Astarion the potion, then went back in for another.

They passed their healing amulet back and forth as they drank. They contemplated the climb. Wobbling informed Wyll it was a very long detour to get down into this grotto, if you didn't take the fool route of hurling yourself over the side of a cliff.

"I'm not going anywhere," Astarion said firmly. "There are no mushrooms here that can explode and that's good enough for me. Great place to camp."

And he'd just died, and Wyll's head hurt almost as much as his heart. He'd managed to keep Astarion alive through all of this, only to lose him to a damned mushroom patch. They made camp.

Astarion's pouch in the haversack must have been half blankets by now. He'd stolen even more of them from the Duergar; their combined bedroll with its trillimac sleeping pads was practically a nest. Wyll ate his ripplebark mushrooms and leftover smoked lizard. Astarion drank the Duergar blood they'd set aside, all but one bottle. It'd be congealed by the next day even in the cold airless space of the haversack, but Astarion refused to drink it. Just in case. Wobbling told stories of calves and their mushroom misadventures, which Wyll narrated for Astarion's benefit.

They shouldn't both sleep at the same time, Wyll pointed out. Someone should keep watch, in case of predators. Astarion shivered, and agreed, but asked if Wyll would mind sitting with him while he tranced. Just so he knew where he was. They didn't talk about it, but Wyll was sure that dying again had rattled Astarion. It had certainly rattled him.

He couldn't stop himself from touching that thought, like a moth to flame. There'd been a brief moment where Wyll had been the only one alive. If Astarion's soul wasn't chained to his body, he'd have lost him. Fires rarely left enough of a body to revive. Guilt and grief threatened to overwhelm him again. Wyll hadn't been cautious enough. He hadn't paid enough attention to the task at hand. He'd been far too distracted thinking about Astarion.

Wyll looked at Astarion, blankets pulled up to his chin, body curled around Wyll's. He'd left his armor on to sleep, and Wyll was pretending he hadn't noticed. Astarion didn't breathe when he tranced. The lack of movement kept tricking Wyll's heart into thinking something awful had happened, again.

He had no explanation for how he'd grown so fond of Astarion so quickly.

He could explain it by logic, but logic felt so woefully insufficient. For seven years Wyll had been drowning in isolation and he would have suffered any companionship just to get his feet upon solid ground. And yes, he loved all of his companions–Lae'zel and Shadowheart and Gale and Karlach. They had all floundered onto the shore out of very different hells, but for all their differences they shared this one thing–by creed or compulsion, by disaster or duty, they were each of them alone. They had all forgiven Wyll for his pact and allowed him to travel with them despite it. How could he not love them?

Logic said that what he felt for Astarion was merely that. The floundering of a drowning man, clinging to that last piece of driftwood when the others he had been clinging to sank beneath the waves. That he felt *more* precisely because Astarion was the last one left.

But there was also this: Astarion didn't want him to be the leader. Oh, he wanted Wyll to tell him which mushrooms were deadly and how to ward off a flock of stirges. He wanted Wyll's help. But when it came time to decide where to go and what to do, Astarion wanted to be Wyll's equal. His partner.

If they hadn't been trapped together and forced into that initial precarious alliance, would Wyll have ever known Astarion? Or would he have been that flinching shadow at the back of their party, alternating between fury and fawning at the slightest provocation? And if they hadn't met through blood, if they'd crossed paths in the city: would Wyll have even given Astarion a second glance? Or would he have seen his soft hands, his embroidered shirt, his mannerisms and innuendo, and thought Astarion was something privileged and petty?

Petty, most definitely. Astarion wasn't overflowing with benevolence. He wouldn't risk his skin for a stranger. Many people wouldn't, though, and Wyll didn't hold the average citizen to the standards of the Blade. And for all the sour things that dripped off Astarion's tongue, he wasn't as utterly selfish as he claimed. He'd saved Wyll's life during the carrion crawler attack. He'd forced Wyll to rest. He'd thrown away the weapon he wielded with the tadpoles rather keep Wyll terrified and at his mercy. He'd offered him a dance.

Part of Wyll said that surely he had higher standards than the absence of malevolence. The other part said that Astarion had gone from trying to rip out his throat to suckling sweetly at his wrist with only a week of kindness. How much more would he grow, if given the chance?

Logic said all that, and it wasn't enough. It didn't cover the way Astarion had swung easily through the shadows, sniping Duergar as they'd tried to climb up the rope ladders and break Wyll's concentration as he blasted them into the hunger. It didn't cover the way he'd made awful jokes as they strung one of the bodies upside-down to bleed into a jar. The way he kept coaxing Wyll into making dreadful jokes himself and then grinning like he'd won some sort of prize. Astarion didn't want the untarnished mask the Blade wore, or the servile obedience of a hound. No one had wanted Wyll to be *Wyll* in a very long time.

And also: Astarion was beautiful. The man might have been a caricature of vampirism, but the cheap printers didn't sell vampire romances by the cart-full because a caricature of vampirism was unattractive.

He could imagine himself falling in love with this man, if he let himself.

He couldn't let himself.

Wyll had no future. Astarion might–if Wyll could beg the favor from Mizora, he would break his banishment to kill Szarr. With Szarr dead, they could hunt down a way to steal Astarion from Mephistopheles' deal. Astarion would live. Wyll would die and Mizora would take his soul to Avernus.

And what did Wyll have to offer him in the present? A secret third in their romance, Mizora sidling between them, lurking through his eye? She'd shaped his body into this for a reason. She wouldn't have done it if she didn't intend to use it. And if Wyll provoked her…

If they were very chaste, perhaps she wouldn't interfere. But Astarion had laughed at the idea of courtly love and courtship. He didn't want what Wyll wanted, and that was the end of it.

He couldn't have Karlach either, no matter the fantasies Astarion concocted. For all the same reasons–Karlach deserved someone who could give her a future, who could give themselves completely, no cambions leering at her through the hole in his skull. And Astarion was right; Karlach didn't seem the sort to content herself with half-measures. Once she was cured and free to touch she ought to be *free to touch*, not bound to another devil.

Wyll decided to get ahead of any further offers of Astarion's services by explaining first thing why he had nothing to offer a lover, Karlach or any other. There were things he couldn't say, but not enough to actually hide the truth.

"As a warlock, I have no privacy from my patron."

"I cannot promise fidelity, because my body is not my own."

"I have never been allowed to keep a companion before the parasites, and I've no reason to think she'll allow me to do so once they're gone. I couldn't share someone's life."

"And when I die, or fail, I go to her. She chose to toss me back once. But I only live as long as it amuses her for me to live. And I am sick of being her entertainment."

A warlock couldn't wish for death. But if Mizora was determined to use him for evil purposes whether he lived or died, he would deny her as long as he was able. He harbored no delusions of how long he would last once he began to defy her in earnest.

Wyll paced the length of the narrow grotto as he explained; nails digging into his palms, neck aching from the weight of his horn. When he ran out of words, his courage failed him. He couldn't look at Astarion.

Water dripped off the rock walls. It echoed.

"Do I seem stupid?" Astarion asked.

Wyll turned to find Astarion glaring at him from their bedroll. His ears were back and his hands were clenched in the blankets like he wanted to tear them to shreds. Wyll didn't flinch back. He channeled the Blade and held himself steady under the weight of Astarion's disapproval.

"I don't think you're stupid," Wyll assured him.

"Then why are you telling me things that any idiot could figure out?" Astarion asked. "You don't have privacy? Really? I would never have guessed that the devil patron who sends you on solo missions while she gads about in Avernus would have a means of surveilling you.

Obviously I thought she just took you at your word whether you did as you were told. A devil with the ability to scry her warlock whenever she wants? Who could possibly have guessed."

Astarion rolled his eyes. "And really, what would Karlach know of having a devil claim ownership of her body? After all, she only belonged to Zariel for a decade. Zariel, who sent one warlock to kill her and fetch her back to Avernus already. Wyll, darling, I'm afraid you are not uniquely doomed. We're doomed in triplicate: you, me and Karlach."

You, me and Karlach. The words stuck in Wyll's head like a bard's refrain, even as he rejected the rest of Astarion's sentence. Astarion and Karlach weren't doomed. They were trapped, they were hunted, but they could be saved.

A voice that sounded suspiciously like Astarion's pointed out that Wyll was also trapped and hunted, by Mizora, and one cambion couldn't be harder to slip than two arch-devils. But that was nonsense–the other two had sworn no pacts. Wyll had. He was soul-bound. It was different.

Wyll hesitated too long. Astarion crossed the space between them before Wyll could think of any intelligent rebuttal. Cautiously, Astarion laid his hand over Wyll's stone eye. *Was it really so obvious as that?*

Astarion asked: "You don't want intimacy without love, but you won't accept love either. Do your fantasies leave no room for you to steal hope for yourself? Is that only for other people?"

"It's not–" *worth it.* Wanting only made your stomach ache the harder when you were starving. It was easier to endure, the less he wanted. In the edges of his fantasies, yes, he imagined the impossible. Being set free, being forgiven, being home. But he knew not to focus on those thoughts, lest the sun blind him and make the world he had to live in even darker.

"We both know I'm not brave," Astarion said. "Eternity is too much to imagine, you have to think around it so you don't go insane from the fear. But we have a little freedom now. We might never have it again. Are you really going to waste it?"

Was he?

Wyll tried not to think about the future. He tried not to think himself out any further than he could see, for fear of his nerve failing. But Astarion was right that there might never come another chance like this. Mizora had kept him from companions for seven years. Whether they won or lost, once it ended he would be hers again. Was it better to hold himself back from love or to throw himself over that ledge, knowing it would end all too soon?

Was that so different from the choices any person had? Life could end at any moment, and the half of you lost to grief. Wyll's father had lived all his childhood in the shadow of it. And still, he didn't think his father had ever regretted Francesca. Wyll, perhaps. But not her…

Wyll reached up to take hold of Astarion's wrist and keep that cool hand pressed against Mizora's stone. "You're right," he said.

“Of course I am,” Astarion said hotly. He paused. “About which thing in particular?”

“This is a chance I will never have again, and I ought not waste it,” Wyll said. “I am surrounded by people who know of my pact. Even if you don’t know all of it. You can still choose freely, knowing there are secrets I cannot share.”

“Yes, exactly what I was saying,” Astarion said, eyes wide. This close, Wyll could see that his eyelashes were a perfect silver to match his hair, almost invisible. They were lovely.

But if choosing love was a leap of faith, choosing who to love was impossible. Astarion was right there and so clearly wanting. But Wyll had fallen for Karlach first, and to let her go because she was dead and Astarion wasn’t seemed cruel. But to use Astarion as he’d suggested, using him only as a stepping stone to Karlach’s love, seemed intolerable.

“Tell me this. You offered to teach me–why? I need to know that this isn’t some misguided attempt to pay me back for rescuing you or to keep my support once the others are revived. I *will* support you, and you owe me nothing. Tell me that you would enjoy kissing me.”

Astarion flushed, borrowed blood high on his cheekbones. “You can’t just–am I not selfish enough? Have I somehow given you the impression I’m not a selfish man? People enjoy kissing, you know. Many people enjoy kissing!”

“People do, sure. Do you?”

An image bloomed in Wyll’s mind, and this time he knew it was Astarion’s. Astarion was on his knees in a field of tall grass, by the seaside, near Waterdeep. His head was tipped back beneath the radiant morning sun, Wyll haloed in front of that sun as he leaned forward and kissed him–the whole of his body suffused with pleasure, warmth tingling in the forgotten ends of his fingertips as he remembered briefly what it felt like to be alive.

“…yes?” Astarion said. Wyll’s hand was on his wrist, though, and he couldn’t help letting slip through the cracks other hands. Holding him down. Pushing him up against the wall. The bed. Pulling him where they wanted him to go, puppeting his body through the motions of pleasure. Hands. *Always how it started, other people’s hands on him.*

Wyll dropped his hand and pulled away, snapping the connection.

Astarion stumbled back, hand going to his wrist like it was bruised. “I’m not lying!” he said hotly.

“I didn’t say you were,” Wyll said. He hadn’t said anything at all. “It’s different, after all, when you want it.” He hoped that was true. He was hoping very badly that that was true. Another reason to take Astarion up on this absurd offer–he didn’t know if he could offer Karlach sex even if she was cured. He should know if he could offer her any touch at all or if Mizora had soured all of it. It made him feel strangely better if Astarion wanted to use him as a test subject in the same way–testing where was safe to step together through the minefields of their minds.

Looking at it that way, it all made sense. Astarion wanted Wyll to kiss him because he knew they were alike in this. He wanted to claw his way towards being safe in his own body. He wasn't in love with Wyll, of course, that would be absurd. But attracted, maybe, and willing to take the chance on pleasure he'd been so long denied. He thought Wyll was safe because he'd been deep enough in his mind to take his intentions on faith.

Something bloomed, warm and satisfied, at that thought. Astarion couldn't think he was incurably wretched if he'd been that deep and still thought Wyll was the sun. It wasn't greedy to take Astarion's offer and still hope for something with Karlach later. Astarion didn't love him, after all.

"It's different," Astarion agreed. "Won't you let me show you?"

Wyll closed the stone eye, then crossed his arms behind his back, hands safely out of the way. "Alright," he said. "Show me?"

Astarion's eyes darted to Wyll's hands, then back to his face. The black armor and pale skin really did make it his flush starkly visible. Astarion reached out, then hesitated, the slightest tremor running through his fingers. "If you were kissing Karlach you'd do it properly. You'd put your arms around her–well. Probably she'd have lifted you up in the air, so you'd put your hands around her neck to stop her from dropping you by accident. Assuming she wasn't going to burn you. But–right, yes. Maybe she isn't cured yet and this is a stolen kiss. Try not to touch her any place you don't know it's safe. Keep your hands behind your back, very smart."

Wyll tried not to smile at the rambling. It was hard. Was Astarion nervous?

"What then?" he asked.

"Well, you're you, so I assume you'd make a whole thing out of it. You'd probably put one hand on her cheek," Astarion said, as he did just that. "It's a good plan, because it lets you gently angle their head and stop your noses from crashing together. Or, worse yet, them getting overly excited and crashing their chin into your nose. Most people are not into nosebleeds."

Wyll had to ask. "How do you feel about nosebleeds?" He could remember, vividly, the sensation of Astarion licking blood off of his face, breath coming in little mewling pants, like he'd forgotten he didn't have to breathe but couldn't breathe and swallow at the same time.

"You were going to pretend that never happened!" Astarion said. His hand went to his breast in mortal offense. "Keep your disgusting nose-blood to yourself, Saer. I want no part of it."

Wyll bit his tongue to keep from laughing. Then remembered he was about to be kissing a vampire and that would probably be a bad idea. Half a laugh broke past his iron defenses. "I shall guard my nose closely, then," Wyll promised.

"See that you do," Astarion sniffed. He pressed his cool fingers against Wyll's cheek, angling his head slightly, then leaned in and paused a hairs-breadth away, such that his words touched Wyll's skin even though they weren't yet kissing. "You'd probably have lead up to this with a

chivalrous kiss on the back of the hand. Or a kiss to her neck. Or one to the very corner of her mouth. Because romantics believe in creating suspense about even the simplest things."

Astarion kissed the corner of Wyll's mouth, lighting Wyll's skin up with the barest hint of sensation. "I don't think that's why they do it," Wyll protested. Though he couldn't deny, the closer Astarion got to kissing him without actually doing the deed made the tension in his body ratchet higher. Wyll shifted, uncomfortably aware of the situation in his pants once again. Hopefully Astarion wouldn't press too close.

"No, that's definitely why. Then you go in for the kiss. Remember, you can breathe through your nose. Virgins are always forgetting they can breathe through their noses and acting like they're going to die if you kiss them for too long. The kiss itself–when it's good, it's like your dance. You push, they press back. However far they want to take it, they'll show you. Some people want to go all the way, right away, tongues down each other's throats and spit all over their chins. You're a gentleman, though, so I think you'd kiss like this," Astarion said, and pressed his lips against Wyll's.

There was none of the weeping and desperation of the last time Astarion kissed him, just smooth confidence. Astarion's second hand came to join the first, cradling Wyll's face as he slotted their lips together and leaned into it. Wyll clenched his hand around his wrist and held himself an eager target for Astarion's kiss. *Like a dance*, Astarion had said. Wyll pressed back against him like a dancer giving tension to their follower.

Astarion made a soft, pleased noise. His mouth opened slightly against Wyll's and Wyll followed. He reminded himself to breathe through his nose, because it was tempting to drink in the taste of Astarion's breathe and drown in it, softly fragrant with what was probably blood and decay and still somehow irresistible.

Astarion pulled away. Only then did Wyll realize he'd closed both eyes during the kiss. He took a deep breath and opened them. Astarion looked like a cat who'd got into the cream, fangs slipping out over his lips as he grinned. Wyll smiled back.

"How did I do?" Wyll asked.

"Terrible," Astarion lied. "But it's fine. We'll keep practicing. You'll get it eventually."

Wobbling was sure to tell him that they were absurd, mashing their faces together every time they took a break on the path. Wyll didn't have a defense, though Wobbling's accusation that they were 'young sex-crazed bulls' couldn't be further from the truth. By some unspoken agreement, they were both doing a very good job pretending neither of them had noticed Wyll's arousal. By that same unspoken agreement, they were pretending Wyll needed a great deal of remedial practice with slow and easy closed-mouth kisses with his hands behind his back.

Wyll felt–happy?

Anxious, most certainly, and guilty whenever he remembered the dread weight carried in his pack and the solemn burden he owed to their companions. But Mizora didn't say a word and

there was always that thrill when he got away with something under her nose. Maybe she was busy. Maybe Zariel had called her to task for Wyll's defiance, or she was caught up in important business. Maybe Wyll could have this and she would never know.

In the meantime, happiness was like untrampled snow in the early morn after a storm, and he couldn't stop himself from scooping it up in his hands by the handful. Mouthful. Was this how Astarion had felt when he tasted Wyll's blood? If so, he wanted to let Astarion drink from him even more. He'd forgotten what happiness felt like.

They found a temple, dedicated to Selûne, but couldn't get in because of its defensive magics. There was a dead minotaur on the steps, which Wyll took as a warning to pull Astarion back before he was blasted with holy light. They went elsewhere.

They found a sword stuck in a stone, a Drow-make rapier with gold lettering engraved on the blade. It sang of magic, the very air around it humming with energy. Astarion was entranced. "This is the sort of thing you'd read about in a book," Astarion said. "Why is it stuck in the rock? Why is it still here? It looks powerful. Surely someone should have come by and stolen it by now if it was worth anything."

Wyll knelt down and inspected the lettering. He didn't know much of the Drow language, but he recognized the name of Eilistraee, their goddess of light. Hopefully a sign that it wasn't a cursed blade–killing everyone who touched it would neatly explain how it remained stuck in the stone. No nearby skeletons, though.

They tried pulling the blade free and couldn't budge it–clearly it was held in place by magic. Neither of them knew enough about Eilistraee to guess what magic her clerics might have used to stick a sword into a stone. "It's like that damned immovable object spell Gale used on that iron round my neck," Astarion complained, taking a break from tugging at it. Wyll felt a pang of guilt, remembering how awfully frightened Astarion had been, pinned to the ground and scrambling at the iron bar around his neck. Astarion didn't seem bothered by the memory, because he continued "At least that spell didn't last forever! Is this really what the gods waste their power on? Keeping people from using perfectly good swords?"

"Apparently." Wyll sighed. It was a very tempting sword. It was a shame. But they couldn't waste half a day attempting to overpower a goddess. They had too many tasks to complete. "Let's keep moving."

"Oh, don't give up just yet," Astarion wheedled. "We can't find you the perfect magic sword and then just walk away! We can outsmart her. What do people who care about gods usually sacrifice on altars?"

Lots of things. Money. Flowers. Love letters. Oxen–Wyll was certainly not putting a knife to Wobbling's neck over a sword, no matter how nice a sword it was. Though… "Blood is traditional," Wyll said. "For swords."

"The one thing I could never sacrifice," Astarion said with a sigh. "Never had enough of it, you understand. I tried, you know. I tried all of them, the fucking bastards. But my prayers

were only words and whatever gold I could steal and–maybe that's why it was never enough for any of them to intercede. They wanted the damned blood."

"I'm sorry," Wyll said. He would never understand how gods could pick and choose–some mortals to bless and others to abandon. He would never understand how anyone could look at them, knowing that, and be moved to worship instead of disgust. "Someone should have saved you."

"I rather think I could say the same thing to you," Astarion said. "Anyway. I'm not giving a goddess my lunch, so if you want to bleed on the sword, you're going to have to cut yourself."

Wyll used a knife to pierce his thumb–on his left hand, because he'd once made a very foolish blood pact with a childhood friend and been forced to explain to his father why he couldn't pick up a sword after he'd cut too deep–and spread blood over the exposed blade. When the blood touched the blade, the faint song in the air grew louder. Then louder still as more blood flowed. The song cut to the heart, the sort of thing that made you want to run and dance and pull Astarion into another kiss. When the song hit its apex, the sword lifted itself from the stone and hung there in the air, glowing.

Wyll took the blade in hand. The song faded away, but he could feel the working of it in the blade, how it would shriek or sing at his command. It was beautiful. It felt wrong to chain it with Mizora's magic. He would, regardless. No matter how he hated her, he needed the powers she gave him to act as the Blade. But for a moment, he just stood and admired the sword he held in his hand.

"It's perfect for you," Astarion said, ducking close. "Now, about that sore thumb of yours…it seems to be leaking. Were you planning on doing anything with that extra blood?"

Astarion sucked his thumb, and it was definitely not an erotic experience in any way, not at all. He followed it with a kiss, Wyll's blood still on his tongue. Which was similarly unaffecting.

But it was fine. It had only been a few hours since they started kissing. For educational purposes. They both had things fully under control and neither of them were going to do anything so foolish as catching feelings.

Wyll had everything under control.

Chapter End Notes

i had two goals in this chapter:
- montage so it would be shorter
- get them out of the freaking underdark

i did not succeed on either front, but we're getting there! I'll have them out beginning of next chapter for sure.

p.s. You might say: Lynn, phalar aluve isn't a rapier. but consider: wouldn't it be cool if it was? why are there so few cool rapiers? wyll deserves more toys to match his preferred fighting style and I am going to give them to him

p.s.s. If you're even more of a nerd, you might say: Lynn, the handy haversack's weight limit is 120 pounds. you can't possibly put three dead bodies in it. Well, I was referring to the '24 5e statblock, which has increased the haversack's weight limit to 900 pounds, and makes 100% more sense. Capacity for all the dead bodies you could want.

p.s.s.s. If you saw the version of this chapter where the italics were all messed up, no you didn't. I have no idea what ao3 did to my innocent chapter. It's fixed now, I hope.

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